AGAR HALFI THE MYSTIC

ROLAND FILKIN

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AGAR HALFI THE MYSTIC

BY

ROLAND FILKIN

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AGAR HALFI THE MYSTIC

PROLOGUE

HUGO ALEXIS BRENTWOOD gave his assent to Agar Halfi, his right-hand man, to pitch their little camp by the side of the stream at the foot of the mountain. Just for one moment, the Hindoo looked at his master with half-closed eyes; his consent had been merely a mechanical inclination of the head, and Agar Halfi was quite sure that the Sahib was not listening.

Still, it was sufficient; such matters were always left in his hands, and really it was more a matter of form than anything else that he had asked. So without more ado he swiftly gave his orders to the half-dozen servants and carriers, and then busied himself in superintending the preparations for the evening meal. That, to his mind, was an important thing, for no man could work unless he were properly fed.

Meanwhile the leader of this small party leaned thoughtfully on his rifle and continued to gaze absently toward the western horizon, as though fascinated by the vivid sunset. He was in reality reviewing the past eight years of his life, spent in rough travel, and contemplating with some satis-

faction the knowledge and experience which he had acquired thereby.

When he left England, those who knew him best —they were not many—regarded him as a man who, having given great promise as a psychologist, had discarded most Western theories, and side-tracked into occultism; which of course, from a Western scientific point of view, was mere superstition. His colleagues had put it down to the Eastern blood in him, concluding that his environment had not been strong enough to overcome his hereditary traits of mysticism.

But their point of view did not trouble him greatly. He had drawn his own conclusions, and having plenty of means at his disposal, had decided to make research, and gather facts for himself. His measure of success was more than he had hoped for; some of his theories he had proved up to the hilt; others had not been so satisfactory, but in any case, he now knew that psychology as understood by Western thought was a mere drop in the ocean, such a puny feeble creature, that it was a wonder it had any life at all.

Thus it was that at present he happened to be situated in wild Afghanistan, a country in which he had experienced many weird and strange things, not always to be found even by those who seek them.

At the present time he was not many days' journey from the Persian border; and when at Herat, he had heard a lot of whispered talk concerning a cave in the mountains about forty miles further on. From what could be gathered, the place was stigmatised as haunted; but the people

spoke of it as if half afraid to do so, and the information he could gather was meagre.

It appeared that at irregular intervals the lifeless bodies of people had been found there. This in itself was sufficient to give the place an evil repute, but it could hardly have accounted for the firmly implanted idea that the cave was under the influence of the Evil One. All the bodies had been mutilated in the same manner. In each case the throat had been torn as though with a sharp instrument; but the wound was a jagged one, such as no known weapon could inflict! No doubt it was this latter fact that caused the natives to condemn the cave as under the spell of the supernatural. At any rate, that was all he could get to know, so he had determined to go a little out of his direct course and examine the place.

It was the crackling of the fire and the clink of tin pots that brought him back to his present surroundings. It then immediately occurred to him that Agar Halfi had asked for orders to pitch camp. Remembering that, he turned his eyes to see what sort of a spot they were in, and after a cursory glance, nodded with approval.

The position selected by the Hindoo was a good one, being sheltered on two sides by the rocky base of the mountain which formed a right-angle, and flanked on a third side by a stream which bubbled swiftly down to the plains below in a northerly direction.

Satisfied, he took up his glasses and carefully surveyed the rugged Afghan landscape. At length his eyes rested on a portion of it which seemed to be of particular interest, for he looked at

it long and steadily; then dropping his glasses, he gave a low exclamation of satisfaction. There could not be much doubt that this was the place he had set out to visit.

He was disturbed in his meditations by Agar Halfi informing him that supper was ready. Yawning, he slung his rifle on his back and stretched his tired limbs; then looking keenly at the wiry supple figure of the Hindoo, said:

"Agar Halfi, to-night we will rest; to-morrow you and I will visit yonder cave, and if there is a demon there, we will exorcise him."

He laughed a little grimly as he spoke. He was barely thirty-five years old, and had not yet reached that age when men do not talk too confidently about those things which they have to tackle, however certain they may be of the issue. But there was some excuse for his confident tone. During his eight years' sojourn, he had nearly always been successful in clearing up to his own satisfaction—if not always to the satisfaction of those concerned—the many weird cases that had come across his path, and he did not think then that a day would dawn when he would be baffled, and indeed narrowly escape with his life.

Agar Halfi—forty years if a day—shook his head gravely, and did not reply immediately. He was a mystic of the Eastern school, and once had been within the shadow of death, when probing too far into the mysteries of the underworld. There was a note of warning in his voice as he answered:

"Maybe, Sahib, we shall exorcise him, maybe not—maybe he will exorcise us! Who knows?"

A slight smile flitted across the white man's

handsome face at the Oriental's quaint way of rebuking him, but it died almost immediately as on second thoughts he replied :

"True, my friend, you did well to chide me for my self-assurance. It is time experience of these things had taught me not to speak lightly of them. Still, let us eat and drink, then rest, or we shall be no more fit physically to do battle with this evil thing, than these poor natives are mentally."

Saying which, he led the way to their rough repast, which they made mostly in silence, excepting for occasional question and answer regarding their equipment, their stores, and things in general. When they had finished, the explorer brought out a pipe, which he carefully filled, and lying back on his elbow, began to smoke. The Hindoo, who did not indulge in the narcotic weed, rose and went on his usual evening mission to see that all was well for the night. When he returned, he piled fresh fuel on the fire, and squatting down—Eastern fashion —sat staring at the flames.

Brentwood, smoking retrospectively, watched him lazily for a time. At last he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and stifling a yawn remarked :

"The worst of this sort of case is, that one can get so little information—has to take so much on trust."

Without moving his eyes from the fire, the Oriental replied :

"That is true, Sahib—the fact is, ignorance strikes terror into the hearts of these poor devils, and they think that if they speak too loudly, or say too much, the hobgoblin will lay in wait for them."

"Unfortunately that is so," answered his companion. "Also unfortunately, it has been the means of putting us more than once into a very tight corner."

The Hindoo grunted emphatically. "A man can only die once, Sahib, and he will not die until his time comes."

"True, my friend, but he can precipitate his end by acting rashly."

"Also true, Sahib, but then, his time has come," replied Agar Halfi with finality.

Brentwood yawned again; he was too tired to argue upon those lines, so getting his blanket, he rolled himself up, and with a lazy "good-night" prepared to settle down.

But sleep did not come to his tired eyes; his active brain would not rest, and try as he would, he could not shake off a dim feeling of depression. At last he raised himself on his elbow, and looking across the fire at the set face of his companion, said:

"What do you make of this cave business, Agar Halfi?"

The Hindoo, who had not moved since he sat down, raised his head mechanically, and looked at the speaker with vacant eyes. He had the blank expression of the somnambulist, whose mind—occupied with the internal workings of the brain—is dead to external influences. At length the light broke into his eyes, just as if his soul—being at a distance—had heard a call, and returned swiftly to its house of clay.

"Ah, Sahib, the time is inopportune; evil directions of the stars work against you, and, as I said when at Herat, we should have done well to have forgotten this place."

"You are pessimistic," replied Brentwood, in a tone of slight irritation. "Even if the stars are against us, it does not follow that their rays are fatal or that we cannot overcome the trend of their influence. Surely, Agar Halfi, you are falling back to the old fatalistic fallacy of your people?"

The Oriental's eyes flashed a little in the firelight, as he answered in his grave voice:

"Now for certain the Sahib knows that Agar Halfi is no fatalist; he eradicated that doctrine from his soul long ago. But although the evil directions of the stars may be overcome by the wise and the good, does my friend think that the way to counteract them is deliberately to walk into the danger zone?"

"Perhaps I am over-confident," replied the other meditatively; "but then I think differently to you. My English blood gives me thoughts of which you are unconscious. It is quite possible that one may enter the danger zone and still overcome the opposing forces."

The Hindoo slowly shook his head. "Is it wise to risk the jaws of the tiger, when you can kill him from a safe distance?"

"Still, Agar Halfi, for better or worse we are here now, and we will make a bold bid to uproot this mystery. Once again, what is your opinion about it?"

"That we shall not come to grips with it!" he answered bluntly.

At this retort, Brentwood sat upright and stared surprisedly at his companion, who returned his look steadily.

"Do you mean that we shall not succeed in this matter?"

"I shall be satisfied if we both escape with our lives!"

The explorer looked at him closely for some time, and his face grew stern as the thought flashed through his mind that possibly the Hindoo would like to shirk this task; but he discarded it almost as soon as it was born, and said quietly:

"Agar Halfi, I have known you ever since I set foot in India over eight years ago. Since then, we have travelled together constantly, and, during that period, I have never known you to shrink once. Speak, what is in your mind?"

"You say, Sahib, that you have never known Agar Halfi to shrink once; true, neither will he shrink now; but he knows that there are forces at work here which are more powerful than the Sahib thinks, and—well, friend Brentwood, we are not Mahatmas."

A grim smile turned up the corners of the white man's mouth.

"Well, suppose I take your advice and turn back now?"

"Why waste words, Sahib? you know you will not turn back."

Brentwood laughed in a low voice.

"That is true, my friend—I shall not turn back."

"Nor will Agar Halfi," replied the other stolidly. "Where the Sahib goes his friend and servant will go also. For he remembers that once, when fleeing from the wrath of the priests, into whose secrets he had dared to look too deeply, a white man gave him refuge, food, and clothing, and saved his life.

Some day, perhaps, Agar Halfi will repay that debt —who knows ? "

A long silence followed the Hindoo's last remarks, and they both looked at the fire, neither desiring to speak. At length the Oriental raised his hand, and said gravely :

" Listen, Sahib, and I will tell you a legend of these mountains."

Brentwood inclined his head in assent, and the Hindoo continued :

" Far away in the bygone past, there once lived a wizard, who practised his rites under the shadow of one of the great Persian kings. This man was a very wise and good one, who lived a clean, upright life, and always strove to do his best to uplift the people of his country. So great was his power, and so well-beloved was he of the people, that they said he was the far-famed Zoroaster come back to earth again.

" He was strong and handsome, and though barely forty years of age, he had guided the councils of the king for many years with his wisdom, and they were close friends. But his life was not fated to be a smooth one, indeed it was to end in pitiful tragedy.

" Now there resided in the palace a sister of the king, who was a sorceress. Through her brother, she wished to rule the kingdom, and no doubt would have done so but that the power of the wizard barred the way. Several times had she tried to thwart him, but her arts and spells were impotent against the white magic which he used. She was evil as well as beautiful, this sister of the king, and, in her great jealousy, she determined to encompass the downfall of the one man who stood in the way of her ambition.

"One day she made excuse to her brother the king, saying that she wished to retire for a period from the court, in order to seek solitude to enable her to gain strength in the magical arts. She obtained his consent, and for a whole month no one saw nor heard of her. What happened during that period is not written, but when she came back she had changed. There was more magnetism in her eye, more subtle power in her voice, and, what was more, she returned not alone! Dwelling in her private chamber which she used for magical ritual was a familiar demon, in the form of a huge vulture-like roc, that had evil gleaming eyes, and followed her about like a shadow. Such, Sahib, had been the fruits of her sojourn in the wilderness.

"With the aid of the familiar, the sorceress found means to enforce her wicked will. She caused the wizard to fall in love with her, knowing that thus she would deprive him of his control of powers which enabled him to hold his high station. At first, being long estranged from things of the flesh, he resisted the influence; but gradually the spell worked into his system, and at last he fell a victim to the passion she had created in him.

"Now she knew that his doom was sealed, that she had him in her grasp. Gradually his control left him, he lost his power and fell into disgrace. Too late he realised that he had been duped. In the bitterness of his downfall he changed visibly; black evil rose up in his heart, and he craved for revenge.

"But in the midst of her triumph the sorceress was to taste the bitter cup. Unwittingly she had wrought her own ruin, for, in making the wizard

fall in love with her, she had discovered too late that she really and truly loved him. Now she could not undo the spell she had set in motion, and things must perforce take their course.

"One night, longing to see him, she sent a message asking him to meet her alone. That was just what the man wanted—an opportunity—and while he said he would come, he wondered at her rashness. They met, and so great was her passion for him, that she forgot all else; but revenge was uppermost in the wizard's heart, and he strangled her. Then he fled across the border to these mountains, where he knew he would be safe from the pursuit and vengeance of her brother the king, Safe indeed was he on that score, but he reckoned without the power of the Evil One with whom the sorceress had made the compact in the wilderness. The Master of Evil had not cast his nets in vain.

"One morning, just before the dawn, the wizard awoke in his cave, with the uncomfortable feeling that he was not alone, that another presence was near him. As he opened his eyes, he saw dimly outlined the shape of a great bird, perched on one of the rocks, staring triumphantly at him with malignant eyes.

"He trembled with fear, for he realised now that his doom was sealed; that his time had come. With a hoarse, chuckling shriek the monster drew near to him. He tried to rise, but the power of the demon embodied in that dreadful shape held him terror-stricken. Nearer and nearer it drew, its cruel merciless eyes gloating over the hideous work it was about to perform.

"At length it reached him. There was a terrible

cry as of one in the death throes, followed by a horrid mocking laugh, and all was silent."

Agar Halfi paused, then continued:

"Such, Sahib, is the legend of these mountains, that has been handed down in the mystic schools of the East, and it is said that the soul of the sorceress haunts the caves, seeking her lover. At these periods her familiar appears in the form of the roc, and kills human beings who are unfortunate enough to come within the zone of its evil influence. And this will go on, until sometime in the dim future—as it is said—the wizard will again come to earth, and slay the demon which was let loose from the world of darkness by the sorceress. Then, and not till then, will these two unfortunates be released from their earth-bound condition, and be able to unite once more on the higher planes of the spiritual spheres."

Brentwood sat silent for a while, thinking, and the Hindoo relapsed into himself again, his eyes fixed absently on the fire.

When the explorer spoke it was in a subdued tone:

"That sounds very much like the antics of the hobgoblin we have come to lay, Agar Halfi?"

The Hindoo shrugged his shoulders, which was characteristic of him; beyond that he gave no reply.

At length the explorer settled himself down once more, and this time he slept. Little did he know what would transpire before the sun rose over the eastern rim. Far less did he guess that he would never set foot in the cave he had come to explore, or of the manner in which they would meet the hobgoblin they had set forth to lay.

For a time Agar Halfi sat motionless, staring into

the flames. He was far from easy. He knew that his companion was liable to a violent end from weird and unnatural causes, under the influence of the evil directions from the planet Neptune, which were now beginning to operate in his life. Particularly was this so at the periods of the conjunction and opposition of the lights in the angles, and this very midnight they would be conjoined in the north angle, below the earth!

What could have possessed the Sahib that he should court danger at such a period? He shook his head gloomily. It would have been well, as he had said, if the explorer had forgotten the existence of this place. Moreover, he felt that a powerful influence was around, over which he had no control, and there was something sinister in the atmosphere, like the deadly silence that foreshadows the tropical storm.

The Hindoo had determined that sleep should not close his eyes that night. He knew instinctively, as well as from experience, that evils of this kind struck at the moment when least expected, and that, when the world was wrapped heaviest in sleep, just before the dawn. Yes, he would remain on guard through the night, and prepare for an attack, as far as he was able. To his mind there was no question that instead of being hunted, the evil—whatever it was, and he had made a good guess as to that—was going to hunt them! How far in his judgment he was wrong, subsequent events will show.

Moving quietly, he deftly drew the signet ring from the little finger of the sleeper's right hand, and, resuming his seat, began to slowly roll it between his palms, while, in a subdued voice, he chanted

strange words. With his eyes staring fixedly at the fire, he continued this curious ritual for nearly fifteen minutes, and then, extracting a small packet from the bosom of his garment, he carefully emptied some of the contents into the fire.

For some seconds a thin, straight column of dark green smoke ascended into the air. Then it burst into lurid flame, the tongues of which darted fiercely outward, enveloping the man in a blaze of light. Agar Halfi never moved, but continued to chant in a monotonous tone, still rolling the ring in his hands. Gradually the flames sank back, and the fire resumed its normal proportions. Then, and not till then, did he cease his ritual.

For a moment he glanced at his sleeping companion, then stealthily replaced the ring without disturbing him. Building up the fire afresh, he had one look around to see that all was right, and settled down to his night watch.

How long Agar Halfi sat thus he did not know; for the very thing happened which he had determined to prevent—he slept. The next thing he remembered was being wide awake, staring into the darkness. The fire had sunk low, and it must have been somewhere near the dawn.

He had a dim idea that some sound had awakened him, and while he sat trying to recollect it, his eyes rested on the sleeping form of the explorer. He looked at him mechanically for a moment, then suddenly he noticed that his face was not a natural colour; it had a pale, greyish hue, and the features were drawn as though in suffering.

The Hindoo moved, with the intention of rising and going over to examine him; there was something

which was not quite as it should be. He had, however, hardly reached his feet when a horrible chuckling sound, which made his flesh creep, caused him to turn quickly, his hand on his yataghan. Nothing? He could have sworn that he saw a huge dark shadow receding into the night. He looked keenly into the gloom, trying to follow it, when once more that uncanny sound caught his ear, causing his gorge to rise, and this time it subconsciously awoke some dim memory in his mind. But that had no time to come to the surface, for immediate action was required. The cry came again as if from behind him. He faced around, and this time there could not be any doubt about it; a monstrous shape was hovering over the sleeping white man, who lay with his left arm outstretched, as if to ward something off, and his right hand firmly grasping his throat, while a look of intense horror transfixed his countenance.

Agar Halfi stood as though paralysed, his eyes riveted on the scene, and great drops of perspiration broke out all over him. Surely, he thought, the evil death is upon us? Then a faint hope began to filter into his mind—the Fire Charm which he had wrought! Ah, but would it avail? He could only wait in mute agony and see, some unknown force held him impotent; he could not move.

Look! A great shadowy beak, beneath two awful orbs, was slowly drawing near to the explorer's throat. The Hindoo shook in his fear, as he helplessly waited for the end. He had resigned himself to the inevitable, when once again that horrible chuckle smote his ear, this time swelling into a hideous screech, half-laugh, of baffled rage, dying away into a plaintive wail.

Then the spell broke ; the shadowy shape seemed to melt into thin air. With shaking limbs Agar Halfi stepped across the dying fire, and, dropping on his knees, gazed into the death-like features of his companion. He moved the right hand from the unconscious man's throat, and started back in amazement. Across it was a jagged blood-red line, but no blood flowed from it. Surely, thought the Hindoo, this is the evil of the legend ! And as he gazed horror-stricken, the first faint shafts of sunlight heralded the coming dawn.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

There are villages like flowers in the combes of Somerset,
  There life moves in ordered measure like an old-world minuet,
Life replete with scented blossoms, honest work and well-earned rest,
  With the inn where you may tarry when the sun sinks to the west.
And there's one where I would linger, near the pilgrim path to Wells,
  For its name is like a poem set to song—the " Ring of Bells."

On a bench near the doorway you may watch the dreamy dusk
  Fall on gardens sweet with roses, lady-lilies, stocks and musk,
You can hear the cows' home-coming and the dogs far down the lane,
  And the evensong of thrushes, or the lisping speech of rain,
While the cider laughs alluring with its piquant apple smells,
  As you drink to teeming orchards clustering round the " Ring of Bells."

In a valley fair as this is 'twere no hardship to grow old,
  Mellowing as an apple mellows, homing like the sheep to fold,
With the deep peace of the valley like balm upon the soul,
  With the faith that earth awakens ripening as the seasons roll.
For 'mid beauty Death comes softly, like the tale that autumn tells,
  Like a song with finished cadence, like the last soft Ring of Bells.

ROSE E. SHARLAND,
At the Sign of the " Ring of Bells."

FAR away down the Bristol Channel, lying snugly under the north-west wing of an ever-growing seaside resort, is an ancient rustic village, which for centuries

has slept, deep in the valley between the hills and the western sea.

Cut off from the inland by a fine range of hills, which, sweeping round from the north almost in a semicircle, also encloses the great town of Westsea, this quiet village of Worlstoke dreams on in its rural simplicity.

Although so near such a busy centre—it is only separated from Westsea by three miles of hilly woods —Worlstoke would lie practically undisturbed, but for the few visitors who, deserting the more exciting pleasures of a seaside town, walk to it through the shady paths of the Westsea Woods.

And there, after partaking of tea at one of the cottages, nearly all who wander that way visit the tiny, picturesque church, with its squarely-built, eleventh-century Norman tower; and, if so inclined—and the door is open—climb up the narrow stone steps to the belfry, thence to the roof, and revel in the glorious view to be obtained there.

To the west lies the mysterious sea, stretching across to Cardiff and Barry, while south-west it rolls away down the channel in an ever-increasing flood to the Atlantic Ocean. To the south, over the tops of the trees which form the great woods, the church spires of Westsea are just discernible, and to the north stands out the little headland which, running down to the sea, forms the northern portion of the bay in which the village lies.

About a stone's-throw further down the main road, and on the opposite side to the church, are some broad steps, rough-hewn out of the rock. These ascend to the brow of that portion of the hill forming the end of the woods, and are continued by a path

which leads down the other side, to the hamlet of Storton.

They are known as the "Monks' Steps," and it is said that in the years gone by the fathers used this rough road from Storton to Worlstoke to bring their dead for burial.

The steps are many in number and uneven; but the climb up them, though toilsome, is worth the trouble, if only for the truly magnificent view of the surrounding country which is obtainable at the top.

To the north, directly at one's feet, is a green and fertile valley, stretching right up to the base of the barricading hills, the one end of which fades away in a misty blue, not far from a great seaport town about twenty miles away.

For miles and miles this range of hills runs in a great semicircle, and at last sweeps down to the sea by a small bay, just below Westsea. And there, looking white and beautiful, lies, in panoramic view, this popular seaside resort, as though in the grasp of a giant hand.

But the church and the "Monks' Steps" are not the only items of interest at Worlstoke. If visitors care to take the north road running on a level with the seashore, half an hour's walk will bring them to all that remains of the old priory of Melsea.

The tower is the only part now left of the original priory, but it will well repay those who take the trouble to inspect it.

Other parts of the building are now modernised, and used as a farm, but there is sufficient interest in the surroundings to justify the walk.

It was in this priory that the monks mentioned above used to flourish, from about the eleventh to the

fifteenth century. Rumour has it that they had communication with Worlstoke church by means of an underground passage, though no trace of such a thing has ever been brought to light.

Now it happened that one sunny Sunday morning, in the spring of 19—, the population of this almost hidden village received a shock, so sudden and so unexpected, that it not only for some time afterwards awoke the inhabitants out of their lethargic dreamings, but brought the eyes of the surrounding districts to bear upon the place.

The shock was caused by the disappearance of the Vicar, the Rev. Henry Thornton! It was "Jarge" Wride, the milkman, who brought the first news on his way from the Vicarage. As he said to the next customer he called on:

"Mrs. Galsby" (Mr. Thornton's housekeeper) "she be in a fine way. The Vicar he been an' went oot for a walk las' night, about seven o'clock, an' he idn't come back!"

Such important news, and through such a good medium as the milkman's customer happened to be, spread quickly; and the whole village was very soon discussing the pros and cons of the matter, forming all sorts of conjectures—mostly irrelevant. When, toward evening, there was no sign of the missing man, the excitement grew, and eventually a search party was formed, which sought fruitlessly far into the night.

On the Monday the police were called in, but days passed without so much as a single clue to the mysterious disappearance; not a trace of Mr. Thornton could be found. So things went on, until, a month after the catastrophe, and after the police

had retired baffled, the Rev. Henry Thornton was given up for lost.

The Powers-that-Be appointed a new vicar, and the village began to settle down once more to its ordinary humdrum life.

But the people were not to be left in peace—there was worse in store for Worlstoke. Things went well for a fortnight, and then the inhabitants had a further shock. A second disappearance occurred! This time it was the twenty-four-year-old daughter of the people's churchwarden, and although every effort was made, no clue could be obtained. The Westsea Woods were scoured from end to end, but all to no purpose. She had, like Mr. Thornton, seemingly de-materialised, and vanished completely.

The minds of most of the people now bordered upon consternation. What did it mean? Who was going to be the next victim? Having no explanation of the mystery, several almost instinctively flew to the conclusion that it was something supernatural. People refused to go about after dark, unless they were in twos or threes. Anxious mothers breathed sighs of relief when their children returned home safely from the village school, and even the bolder spirits of the men were affected.

All sorts of weird tales were raked up, told and re-told, and it is quite possible that if an earthquake had swallowed up London Town, the inhabitants of Worlstoke would have made little comment, so centered were they all upon their own particular trouble. To them, one thing only really mattered, and that was what had come to be known locally as the Worlstoke Mystery.

But that by some strange chance, the new vicar

became entangled in the trouble, it is difficult to say what would have happened. His presence brought others into it, and upon them rests this story.

What actually did occur constitutes a strange drama, as the following pages will reveal, if the reader has by now found sufficient interest to seek a little further.

CHAPTER II

THE MENACE AT SUNSET

THE Rev. Philip Alletson, Vicar of Worlstoke, in the county of Somerset, walked slowly and easily along the main path of the great wood that bordered his parish.

Occasionally he stopped and absently contemplated the hard stony path, or unconsciously plucked a leaf from a bush and slowly tore it up, then went on again.

It was evident, from the slightly contracted brows, that he was deeply considering some question of grave importance—at least to him—and as he walked with head bent, a first impression of his rather tall, yet slenderly-built figure, and iron grey hair, would be that he was middle aged. Moreover, a slight stoop of the shoulders—a habit he had when in thought—tended to confirm it. But to see him face to face would shatter that first impression, for the clear skin, keen nose, and full though firm mouth, denoted youth ; besides, one was conscious of energy and power when meeting the steady grey eyes.

He might have been fifty; possibly thirty ; probably he was nearer forty—no one could say, and, after all, it did not matter.

His thoughts troubled him, owing, perhaps, to his extremely sensitive temperament—one might almost say with truth, "supersensitive." Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the average man,

with steady nerves (as it is said), would not have thought twice about the matter which troubled the vicar. He would simply have dismissed it from his mind as one of those strange, inexplicable coincidences that do happen in life.

Mr. Alletson had only been installed at Worlstoke a month, but that period had been sufficient for him to learn much of which he had been ignorant before he accepted the living. Had he known then what he now knew, it might have affected his decision; but indeed only a very weighty consideration would have caused him to refuse the offer, for at the time when it was laid before him, the strain of an arduous curate's life in the East End of the great City had all but wrecked his health. When his rector had intimated that there was a small country and seaside living, with a fair stipend and a comfortable house, at the disposal of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and that he (the rector) had been able to secure for him the refusal of it, the Rev. Philip Alletson had not, under the circumstances, taken long to make up his mind. For who could tell? such another offer might not present itself for years.

He had certainly accepted the living "in haste," but the "repentance at leisure" stage had hardly yet arrived, though an extraordinary incident that happened about a week ago had gone a long way to make him feel that he had acted without forethought, in not inquiring into things before he had finally settled.

It was this incident, coupled with one or two things that he had learned, which perplexed his mind this cool spring evening, for it looked as if the quiet rest which he sought was not to be.

Briefly, the points were:

1. The late vicar, the Rev. Henry Thornton, a mild, good man, if a little weak and easy-going, of forty-five years of age, bachelor, had suddenly and unaccountably disappeared, leaving no trace whatever, and in spite of exhaustive efforts by the police and other people interested, no rational clue had been discovered.

The only light that had been shed on the matter was contained in the detective's report after the search at the vicarage. It tended to show that no premeditated flight had been thought of. All his papers were found in order, and practically every article of clothing he possessed had been sworn to by his housekeeper, with the exception of one suit of everyday clothes and a soft hat. He had gone out on the Saturday evening in the usual way, and had never returned.

2. It had been mooted that Mr. Thornton's ghost had been seen by someone in the village close by the ruins of the old priory of Melsea, and there had been a lot of small talk about ghosts.

3. A small farmer at Melton-Storton had sworn that when coming home through the Great Wood of Westsea one evening, he had been suddenly confronted by two apparitions, one that of a woman, and the other that of Mr. Thornton, both of whom had looked at him in a most evil and threatening way, and then vanished.

4. A fortnight ago, Elsie Hobson, the twenty-four-year-old daughter of the people's churchwarden, had disappeared as mysteriously and suddenly as the Rev. Henry Thornton.

Now it was the coincidence of points 1 and 4 that caused Mr. Alletson to give the matter grave con-

sideration. Point No. 2 could be accounted for in various ways, and as to Point No. 3, well, Farmer Joicey had not the best of reputations for sobriety, particularly when returning from Westsea late at night.

What concerned Mr. Alletson was that two people should disappear in so remarkable a manner. True, there was a lapse of six weeks between the events, but they bore such a resemblance that it made him feel the same cause had probably accounted for both. But what cause? He smote the air with his fist in perplexity; there was no apparent cause. Neither Henry Thornton nor Elsie Hobson had any enemies; both were well liked, in fact the former, from all accounts, was popular, and there was no intelligible reason for either of them to "clear out."

Poor Mrs. Hobson, who had been prostrated with the shock, had not yet recovered. Her husband, a hale man of fifty-five, had grown old in that week of trouble; and Arthur Shepperton, to whom Miss Hobson was engaged, had worn himself haggard in tiring but fruitless search. The surrounding country had been scoured, and the wood beaten from end to end; but all in vain.

The Vicar sighed, and paused in his thoughts. A cool breeze from the north-west blew in his face and brought him suddenly to himself. For a moment he hesitated, surprised, not quite knowing where he was; then he uttered an audible "Oh!" He found he had passed out of the wood, down the gentle slope that adjoined the White Worlstoke Road, passed the church and vicarage a quarter of mile further on; in fact, was quite two miles beyond them, and within a stone's-throw of Melsea Priory.

The sun was setting in gorgeous hue, over the sea to his left, and the last lingering rays, striking the grey stones of the tower, threw out in bold relief the remains of the once beautiful building. He turned and looked at the ruins, with silent admiration, for it was the first time he had seen them. The tower stood out in sentinel fashion, high and commanding; but the sunlight softened the cold look of the stones, and dispersed the otherwise grim appearance which they usually had. Just behind, the thick ivy clung protectingly to the crumbling walls. In the background were ploughed fields, while far in the distance could be seen the dim outline of the Mendip Hills.

He walked a little nearer, to gain a better view, and again stood, drinking it in. Gradually the last bright ray disappeared, leaving the ruin in dull twilight, grey and old-looking.

The evening was very still; hardly a sound broke the silence. Once or twice the distant barking of a dog came across the fields, and the murmuring echo of voices. Occasionally, from the west behind him, the sad voice of the sea caught his ear.

The dusk deepened, and in that calm period just before darkness sets in, a space of time which no language can adequately express, but which the heart and mind alone can feel, the man lost himself in reverie. The night was gently casting a veil over a troubled world before it slept.

Gradually the coming darkness seemed to lift, then a faint silvery light, playing on the walls of the priory, betrayed the new crescent moon, soon to follow the sun over the western rim.

The man breathed deeply; it was exquisite.

Forgotten for the time was the pitiful tragedy that had absorbed his thoughts but an hour ago. He was entranced by the unspeakable grandeur of the closing day.

All at once he felt strangely and completely alone ; a quaint, eerie feeling, as though he were cut off from all humanity—a curious sense of abandonment and desolation seized him. It was as if he only were left in a great universe.

Shaking himself, he smiled. Why, of course he was alone ; but although he passed it over, that feeling of loneliness was not merely the absence of living flesh and blood, as he well knew. Still, the sensation had turned his thoughts into another channel.

He was back in London, fifteen years ago, a young and healthy man, eager for the work before him, and with that remarkable faith in his heart which carries some people through the most arduous struggles.

Ah ! how he worked in those days. His heart was great as well as his faith, and he used to carry out his duties with a vigour that had won for him a name.

And then, slowly but surely, doubts began to trickle through the armour of his beliefs ; and while reason began to coldly drive him one way, he clung with a tenacity almost desperate to his early teachings. They had wound themselves into his life, and it was hard and bitter to even have to think that they were a mere nothing. But he was not satisfied, and he read—heavens ! how hungrily he read, hoping without hope, all types of works ; striving to obtain that for which many others have sacrificed their lives : aye ! and perhaps their souls too.

He shuddered, for in his searchings he had studied and practised Magic! And yet, why should one exclaim? for what will a man not do when his very self-conscious existence seems to be in the balance, and the long and stern struggle within gives no light?

Let us not forget that there is a period in everyone's life when the real self demands that the vexed question of purpose in the universe shall be settled. It is one of our lessons—part of our evolution.

Until we either consciously, or sub-consciously, realise or perceive ultimate good in the nature of things, how can we set ourselves to work for good? Unless, indeed, in the evolutionary process we are forced to travel that path, and are not free to choose the ultimate end, but only to retard or quicken it.

If we coldly examine our beliefs with critical reason, as we undoubtedly should, we receive rude shocks; and if we pursue the process, most of us get landed in an impasse, where we arrogantly flounder, declaring that we have reached the extent of man's rational capabilities.

We treat condescendingly the many who have "faith without reason," and, in our blind ignorance, unjustly include with them the few who, after weary battlings, have struggled out of the man-made cul-de-sac of logic, and found, through intuitive knowledge, knowledge which is in us all, but to which man's artificial reasoning does not lead, some of the great truths of existence.

But let us not be too harsh. The traps into which logical reasoning allures us are many and deadly. For instance, if we come to analyse the conscious desire which is in humanity for prolonged life, the desire not to be swept into oblivion, where are we

landed ? Our process of reasoning will not explain to us whether that desire is inherent merely as a heritage from primitive man, or is something else which at present we cannot understand ; though its tendency is to convince us of the former. Neither can logical reasoning explain many of the truths which we already know—remember that we can know things without reasoning to them. So let us beware ! Though logic is part of truth, truth is not necessarily logic ; for logic is a part of a thing, and truth the whole of it.

Based upon such premises had been the struggle within the Vicar's self ; and he wondered now why he had not then gone mad ; it must have been a very near thing. Perhaps he was on the verge when the crisis came, and his health broke down. Maybe that saved his reason. No doubt the particularly hard position that he held, combined with the prolonged struggle within, had been too much. He had not actually been ill, but after a week of violent headache (neuralgic the doctor called it), a kind of dull, lethargic spell came over him. He went about as if crushed, and was rapidly sinking into an old man, when the offer of Worlstoke came to his rescue.

The young moon sank over the horizon in the wake of the sun, and the sudden change from the dim mystic light to darkness aroused him to a sense of his present environment.

It was chilly. Buttoning his coat across his chest, he turned to go ; when once more that queer, lonely feeling crept over him.

It was uncanny ; more, it was extraordinary, and puzzled him not a little. He could not in any way connect it with anything he had experienced

before. It was as though that part of him which in the evolution of things is always striving for betterment, struggling to uplift, had been wrenched away, leaving his body a hulk of clay, helplessly adrift.

He hesitated, trying within himself to understand this newly-born sensation, and, as he strove to grasp it, he was forewarned that all the old doubts (which had not troubled him since he came to Worlstoke) were slowly beginning to rise.

Could it be that he was again going to suffer all the agony of mind to which he had been exposed in London? He trembled to think of it. Such an ordeal as that could not again be endured without calamity. No human reason could twice sustain what he had passed through during those long, wretched years of trial.

With an effort he controlled himself, overcame the paralysing sensation which gripped him, and once more started off home.

But it was only momentarily. Those doubts, once roused, could not so easily be quelled. Moreover, they were taking definite shape! Something, he could not comprehend what, was actually forcing his mind to accept there and then that not only was there no hope of God, and Good, but that the reverse, evil (so-called), was the only real force or power that existed. That so-called God, or Good, was merely a phantasm of the disordered brain of man. That the whole universe was one mighty, struggling mass of individual atoms, each seeking to destroy the other. That—that—but enough! He stopped dead, mentally and physically, and a cold perspiration broke over him. What was happening? Was he really at last going mad?

He gazed dully through the darkness, trying to disentangle his thoughts. His legs felt heavy and weary, as though the weight of his troubled mind had been materially added to his body, and they could not support the double burden. He almost sank to the ground, and probably would have done so, when something happened which drew him up taut, every muscle tense and senses alert.

Borne on the cool night wind, a long, low, plaintive cry came fretfully calling over the fields, like the whine of a creature in pain.

The man's breath came and went rapidly, in short fits and starts, and irresolutely he strained his ears to catch the sound.

What was it ?

A short deadly silence followed, during which he was conscious of a dual desire. He wanted to go away from that cry—to run, anything, so as not to hear it again. He was aware of a feeling of loathing and repulsion, while something within said "fly."

Simultaneously, he was aware that the hideous cry appealed to him in some way, drew him in a mysterious manner ; and he had a strong impelling desire to go in the direction from which it came.

In spite of his usual outward calm, he trembled, though not knowing why ; for it was not physical fear that held him.

Hark ! Once more it broke forth upon the stillness, whimpering and wailing through the night ; and in it there was a blood-curdling note of wicked mockery.

The Vicar gasped ; it seemed unnatural ; instinct told him that no human voice could make that sound. Then it must be an animal—but what

animal? What beast could produce a cry of that description? It was most improbable; for there was a distinct intelligible note in it, which appealed and called, of which surely no animal was capable; but what other explanation was there?

Moreover, he was keenly sensible of that subtle note, supplicating in an alluring manner to something as yet unknown.

Once more it penetrated the darkness, long drawn out, mournful, and this time—O God! the appeal, the call, was to him. Something in him stirred and responded to it, holding him fast, although he fought hard, in palpable fear and disgust, to overcome it.

Slowly, slowly, impelled by he knew not what, he began to move, as though drawn by invisible hands toward the ruined priory; and as he stealthily glided over the ground, the feeling of horror which had been so acute became less so, until it gradually but surely left him.

His pace quickened, and with it his blood circulated more freely, until a warm glow suffused his body. All at once he felt joyously elated, as though treading on air—a buoyant feeling of awful gladness dominated him.

Tiny patches of green mist began slowly to twist and twirl in the gloom, now at a distance, now close, not more than a couple of yards away. Faster and faster they danced, in a never-ending maze, until the pace became bewildering, and he watched them fascinated.

They seemed to be leading him, but where he did not know, nor did he care much just then, his one desire being to follow, though there was a

dim idea in his mind that they would guide him to some place where he anxiously wanted to go.

He was walking quickly now, and the heat engendered by the sharp physical action, caused him instinctively to want to open his coat. He tried to lift his hand to do so, but some force seemed to hold it down.

Absorbed in watching the dancing mist, he steadily followed in its wake. But the heat became almost intolerable, and involuntarily he again tried to lift his hand to release the buttons, and ease the hot choking feeling at his throat. Once more that same hidden power held it back; but this time, the strong, overbearing desire to obtain relief from the heat compelled his attention for a moment, not consciously, but instinctively, and the resistance irritated, half-angered him. Natural obstinacy resented it, and with a violent jerk, he brought his hand to the top of his coat and literally tore it open.

And now a strange thing happened. Practically at the same time that he released the buttons of his coat, his fingers by accident (?) came in contact with the little gold cross that he always wore round his neck, and clutched it . . .

SNAP! Something seemed to part asunder in his brain with a report. He came to a sudden halt, and stared about him fearfully, as one would when first waking from a dreadful dream. He gave a little exclamation of wonder, then started to laugh, but the laughter died away, as suddenly he remembered that abominable cry. As the thought of it came surging into his brain, he was for a space seized with an over-

whelming nausea, followed by a sense of revolting disgust.

For half a minute he might have stood thus, and then he regained control of his muscles. With a gasp of real fear, he turned and blindly ran as hard as he could run, as though all the powers of Hell were let loose upon his track.

Over the uneven ground he fled, over the hedge at the bottom of the field, and up the road, heedless of all and everything but the fear in his heart, until he fell, exhausted and trembling, but with his fingers still clutching the little gold cross, on the floor of the summer-house in the garden of the quiet old Vicarage. For a short space he lay thus, perhaps sixty seconds, and then he felt himself plunging through black voids, falling, falling into empty, bottomless nothingness. He had fainted.

CHAPTER III

A WOMAN'S FEARS

THE morning following the Rev. Philip Alletson's extraordinary experience found him rather pale, and in a decidedly nervous state of mind. The shock to his system had been severe, and he had contracted a slight cold through being exposed in the summer arbour.

He got out of bed with difficulty, feeling very seedy, and had to use an effort of will to take his cold bath. He felt a little better after the effect of the water, but he was longer than usual dressing, and once or twice narrowly missed cutting himself whilst shaving.

However, he finished his toilet at last, and went down to breakfast fifteen minutes late—a very unusual occurrence.

Beyond drinking some coffee, he scarcely touched the meal; instead, he sat toying with his knife and looking out of the window.

His sister Constance surveyed him with troubled eyes. She was used to his silent ways, but she could see that this morning he was not his usual self; and the fear immediately arose in her mind that the "old doubts"—which had not manifested themselves since they came to Worlstoke—were again weighing upon him.

"Are you all right, Philip?" she asked doubtfully.

"Hardly; I'm afraid I've caught cold, and I feel rather out of sorts."

She sighed with a sense of relief, feeling glad it was apparently nothing worse.

"Do try and eat something; you have almost regained your normal appetite since we came here, and I don't want to see any signs of it falling off. It makes me think of those dreadful days after your illness, when I had to beg and entreat of you to take anything."

Raising his eyes, he looked at her smilingly, and then managed to swallow a few mouthfuls; but it was a poor attempt, and clearly done to please her.

He had a great affection for his sister; indeed, although but twenty-eight, and ten years his junior, she was his closest companion, and had lived with him ever since the death of their mother some eight years ago.

In contrast to her brother, Constance Alletson was rather below than above the medium height, though well-built, with an upright carriage. Her hair was of a fine rich brown, with an auburn tint; and it well matched her fair skin and intelligent dark blue eyes. She was undoubtedly attractive, without being exactly beautiful, though, like her brother, she was reserved and possessed of the same nervous disposition.

She critically watched her brother's forced attempt to eat, and then exclaimed:

"That's better, though it doesn't seem to go down very well, and it is fish too, which I know you like."

He looked apologetic: "No! I'm afraid I must

give it up ; I did not sleep at all well last night, Constance."

" Now that's strange, Philip, *I* could not rest. I kept dreaming in a jumbled-up sort of fashion, though now and again quite vividly. Once in particular, I remember it plainly : I had been running away from something, as you do in dreams, though I didn't know what it was, and had just reached the Vicarage gate, exhausted. I had not even strength to lift the latch to pass through into the house, and all the while this terrible something was approaching nearer and nearer. I had given up all hope and was preparing to be seized, when you suddenly stepped in front of me, between me and the monster. All you seemed to do was to hold up that little gold cross I gave you, which you wear round your neck, and it seemed to be possessed of magical powers. The something gave a horrid cry of baffled rage and fled, and as it went, it turned into Mr. Brentwood !

" Ridiculous, wasn't it ? " she added laughingly.

Philip nodded his head in unconscious assent and eyed her curiously. He was well aware that his sister possessed certain psychic powers—they used to have private sittings together when in London —and he could not help wondering whether she knew anything about his own experience. That reference to the gold cross seemed strange. However, it was unlikely, as she would almost surely have mentioned it before now.

Constance noticed his silence, and misreading it, continued :

" Of course, I know I don't like Mr. Brentwood, he seems to be such a cold-blooded and unsociable

man—and I expect that is why he became the bogey of my nightmare. I apologise, Philip, for maligning him—I know that you and he are good friends."

She drew herself up in mock dignity, and laughed merrily.

"I think you are rather hard on our neighbour, Constance—I don't find him unsociable, and I don't think you would either, if you knew him better. But why should you think he is cold-blooded?"

"Well, do you remember when you told him about the disappearance of Miss Hobson?"

"Yes."

"He never even altered his countenance—it didn't affect him a little bit. I know, because I was looking at him."

"Rather thin evidence upon which to judge him, Constance."

"Well, not only that, but I always had the impression, from the first time I met him, that there was something wicked at the back of his mind. Really, Philip, I don't think I could trust him."

The Vicar laughed in amusement; he had no answer for such reasoning. There was silence for a few minutes, during which Constance finished her breakfast, while her brother watched her.

Then he remarked:

"Ah! dreams are queer things."

"Yes, Philip, I know some of mine are."

"I suppose they all arise from stomach troubles?"

"I'm sure they all don't, and you know they don't," she retaliated.

"Well, at least so we are told by our medical advisers."

Constance laughed. "Now you are teasing."

Suddenly she became serious:

"Have you heard anything more concerning the mystery?"

Her brother looked graver than usual, and shook his head.

"No. I called at the farm yesterday afternoon to see how Mrs. Hobson was, and then learned that no clue had been alighted upon. I am sorry for them—Hobson seems quite an old man, and his wife is still unable to leave her bed."

"Do you know, Philip, I think there is something unnatural about this place." She had lowered her voice, and was bending over the table, her blue eyes gazing steadily into his grey ones.

Just for a second the Vicar's face betrayed surprise; then he said quietly:

"Well, go on."

"These two extraordinary disappearances, which up till now have baffled everybody—surely, if they had been——"

Her brother shook his head and frowned:

"You know, Constance, it is the usual thing to fly to the 'supernatural' to explain a problem when it baffles the reason."

She gave a little gesture of impatience:

"Surely, Philip, you know me better than to think I should——"

"Yes, yes, my dear," he interrupted. "I am quite sure you would not jump to wild conclusions. I merely wanted to emphasise the point, as it is important."

"Well, my impressions on more than one occasion lately have been exceedingly queer, and I am quite certain that there is something more than unhealthy in the atmosphere."

She spoke so forcefully that he could not help being impressed.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, rising, "I hardly know what to think. Still, I must be getting on, I have a heap of work to do this morning."

As he reached the door, she called him:

"Philip!"

He half turned, and she was by his side with her hand on his arm, looking earnestly into his face.

"Something tells me that you are going to try and probe this mystery!"

He smiled and nodded. It was not the first time she had known things in that way.

"Well, promise you will let me know all that you do. I am not easy about it; I feel—er—that something may happen to you."

He laughed reassuringly:

"Don't worry, Constance, I will tell you all I do, and I won't attempt anything desperate. But I must do what I can to try and help clear the thing up; it is my duty."

She did not answer him, instead she turned to the table and busied herself with the breakfast things.

He watched her for a few seconds, then opening the door, went to his own little room—where he did his indoor work—and sat down at his desk. His mind was a little easier now; it was a relief to find that Constance had not any knowledge of the fainting fit which overcame him in the

garden. That would have needed some explanation, and he was not prepared to say anything at present. Had he been found, there would have been no alternative; for he had a plain, straight way of dealing with things, and never paltered with the truth. He would not have countenanced any idea of misleading anyone with regard to the cause of his swoon, least of all his sister.

But he was very far from being tranquil. He was really obsessed with the uncertainty of the whole matter, and, contrary to his natural reserve, he had a desire to put the details before someone else.

Instinctively he thought of Constance, but immediately shook his head. It might ease him to tell his sister, but it was more likely to upset her, and further, he failed to see how it could help matters.

The only other person he could think of was his neighbour, the Master of Storton. If accounts were true, and to some extent he knew they were, Mr. Brentwood was the very man before whom to put such a case. But there were difficulties in that direction. Although they were on fairly intimate terms, the Vicar was not quite sure that he could trust him with such a personal matter. His neighbour was not a Churchman, of that he had no doubt; in fact, he was fairly sure that Mr. Brentwood, if anything, was opposed to the Church. How then would he be likely to treat such a matter coming from a clergyman?

Mr. Alletson was sensitive, extremely so; and he had no desire to encounter the "sceptic's smile." He was quite well aware of the average sceptic's

idea of clergymen, and although he knew it was not true, any suggestion of it was liable to irritate, and he had no wish to cause friction.

But there was the other side to it. His neighbour would perhaps take him seriously, and really, so far as he knew, he was a man of broad mind, and one not likely to dismiss the matter with ridicule.

Then again, why should he ask advice, particularly from a layman? Why not go to the Bishop? The Vicar's eyes twinkled, and he dismissed his Lordship. No! he would let the thing keep, at any rate for the present. So far as he knew, no actual harm had been done. He would wait and see.

As the morning advanced, he recovered somewhat from his indisposition. His nervous system assumed a more normal state, and the depressed feeling with which he had begun the day evaporated. By lunch time he had almost forgotten the incident, in fact his mind was busily occupied with parish matters.

Taking these things into consideration, it was curious that immediately after lunch he went to his escritoire, opened it, took up pen and paper, and wrote the following letter:

"DEAR MR. BRENTWOOD,—Please excuse my importunity. I am taking the liberty of calling upon you on Thursday morning next, at eleven o'clock, and shall be very glad indeed if you will spare me an hour.

"The notice is exceedingly short, but as you know, my time is much occupied, and I am anxious

to see you immediately upon a matter which is of grave importance.

"I feel sure you can help me, and you will do so when I have put the case before you.

"I must add that I would not have troubled you in this abrupt manner, if I did not feel that immediate action should be taken.—Believe me, yours sincerely, PHILIP ALLETSON."

Every action connected with the writing of it was deliberate, from the putting in of the date to sending the maid to the post. It looked as if he had done it in spite of his recent decision, and this occurred to him shortly after, when it was too late to retract.

He felt annoyed, it was not usual for him to go back on a decision, once he had made up his mind. Why had he done it? He tried to think it out, and failed to satisfy himself.

It was not very comfortable. Could it be that he was losing his grip on things? "Umph." Passing out into the hall, he put on his hat and cloak. Really, he must dismiss it from his mind for the present. He had a big afternoon's work before him and time was getting on.

That evening, at the District Visitors' meeting, the disappearance of Miss Hobson was dwelt upon at some length. During the discussion, something occurred to the Vicar which had not entered his head before. What if his strange experience had any connection with it? At first he rather ridiculed the idea; there seemed to be no link. But before he went to bed that night the thought grew stronger and stronger, until he

began to take it seriously. If such were the case, then it no longer remained a personal matter, and it would be his duty to consult someone else.

Finally, he made up his mind to put the whole facts before Mr. Brentwood on Thursday morning, irrespective of his personal feelings. He was bound to do all all he knew to try and clear up the extraordinary mystery surrounding Miss Hobson and Mr. Thornton.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE BREAK OF DAWN

CLANG! clang! clang! clang! clang! The mellow tones of the church clock of Worlstoke, striking the hour of five, floated slowly and distinctly upon the still morning air.

As the last chime died away in the distance, Hugo Alexis Brentwood, the Master of Storton Manor, became suddenly and acutely aware that he was fully awake, staring blankly into the darkness!

Not a sound, not a movement—everything around was wrapped in absolute calm. He was the only spark of life there, quite alone, seemingly suspended in space.

It did not appear to him at all extraordinary, nor did he feel in any way uneasy. To be quite clear, he had no definite thoughts. He was simply there, keenly alert, without any of that drowsiness usually experienced when awaking from slumber.

Physically unconscious, he had no sense of things external, but there was a far-away vague idea that he was floating in the ether; beyond that nothing except this very real mental wakefulness, as though his whole entity was concentrated on something that was going to happen.

He tried to think, to reason, but his efforts failed completely; some force seemed to have

taken control of his mind and was holding it in check.

There was something oppressive about the silence which enveloped him, yet he could not bring his thinking powers to analyse it, try as he would. He knew it, knew that he was in it; further his mind refused to take him.

Nightmare! Of course, that's what it was. Mechanically he went to switch on the electric light by the side of the bed, but his hand merely passed up and down through the air. In a vague way this startled him, though he did not for the moment realise that he should have touched the switch, if he had been in bed.

Oh! well, he must get out and find it—the darkness was irritating, and nightmare was not agreeable. He made as if to rise, and then something jolted in his mind and set the currents of thought running. There was no bed!

A sudden feeling of fear gripped him. Where was he? What had happened? He had a great desire to stand on something solid, and instinctively his hands went forth to grasp—anything, just to hold on.

Almost immediately he had a swaying sensation, and felt that he was being propelled in some curious manner. This was followed by a feeling that he was being compressed, bound tightly in a small space. Simultaneously he was conscious of standing in his night attire, at the east window of his study in the tower, looking intently across the fields at the approaching dawn.

A puff of cold air blew in his face, making him shiver; and with this return of physical con-

sciousness, he discovered that he was half leaning out of the open window, with his hands tightly gripping the casement on either side.

Even now he did not fully comprehend the situation. Somehow his faculties were not working in unison ; as one manifested itself the others seemed to become dormant.

Perfectly still, without any visible sign of breathing, he might have been a statue as he thus stood, while consciousness slowly filtered into his brain.

He was not yet able to grasp the fact that the last thing he could remember was getting into bed the previous evening, and that under ordinary circumstances he should be there now.

To all appearances he looked as if he had gone through an awe-inspiring ordeal, which had bereft him of power to think or move. His dark-skinned face, with its ordinarily firmly-set features, was drawn with pain, while the bloodless lips, tightly set in a straight line, were those of a man holding back a cry of agony.

Gradually the tension relaxed ; he was able to think in a normal manner, and as he became fully cognisant of the circumstances, he drew in a sharp, quick breath.

For a few seconds, which seemed hours, the shock of the reaction seemed to paralyse the heart's action; then that organ, beating with hammer strokes, sent the blood pulsing over his body in a rushing stream. This continued for fully half a minute, until the naturally strong, healthy body of the man reasserted itself, and shaking off the attack, resumed its normal state.

He was, however, perspiring freely, and, mentally, he felt anything but normal. The incident had been extremely unpleasant, and, moreover, this was the sixth or seventh time it had occurred during the past twelve months!

Now, as on other occasions, it had left behind a disturbing influence of something objectionable having happened, though it was but vaguely conveyed to the mind, being merely a dim impression arising from an unknown source. To be quite frank, he could not remember anything that had taken place between the moment of retiring and the moment of waking.

Little by little he gained complete control of himself, and with a shudder, silently closed and fastened the window; then, with uncertain gait, he went heavily down the stairs to his bedroom underneath the study. Hastily donning his dressing-gown and slippers, he returned, and sinking into a large divan chair, tried to collect his thoughts.

It was some little time before he could settle down to think consecutively, his mind would go wandering off in various directions; but eventually he became calmer, and began to sort things out. So far as he could see, there was nothing at all connected with these uncomfortable experiences, excepting that every one of them had happened about dawn. They came at irregular intervals and at various times of the year.

To the ordinary way of thinking, it looked merely a question of sleep-walking, and a case for a medical man. That it was a question for a doctor Mr. Brentwood was fully aware; but what

doctor? There he had come to a full stop, for though not acting professionally, he was a Bachelor of Medicine himself, and had, from a professional standpoint, carefully diagnosed his own symptoms, without success. He knew, none could know better, that it was not a case of somnambulism. He was perfectly sound in mind and body and had strong nerves. Probably at this juncture he might have consulted a specialist, but he was not yet at the end of his own resources.

During his younger days, when a medical student, the enforced close study of physiology had very soon led him into that of psychology, which latter science he had tenaciously set himself out to master—at least all that was known of it.

He had been instinctively drawn toward the subject, partly, perhaps, owing to the fact that Eastern blood was in his veins. Here, he thought, he might find a clue to the strange malady which afflicted him, but he had to admit to himself that the chances were not great, for knowledge of the science at best was meagre, and its ramifications were many.

However, he quite saw that if he discarded this course there was no alternative; so slowly and deliberately he decided to probe the mystery to the bottom—partly because his position was far from comfortable, and he foresaw that the strain of such a complaint as this was bound to tell sooner or later on the strongest constitution, and partly because, being of a masterful, dogged nature, he distinctly disliked to be baffled by anything.

During the thirty-nine years of his existence, ever since he could remember, he had stubbornly

fought all obstacles that had come across his path, and in the same way he would fight this one.

Naturally, he desired to cure the complaint if possible, but beyond that, the mind of the man, trained in science, was keenly anxious to analyse the problem. Research was second nature to him, and the last fifteen years of his life had been spent in that direction, nine of them in the East, the home of his mother.

If there was one point more than another which troubled him, it was that each time he had undergone the uncanny experience, he had for days afterwards found himself trying to recollect what had happened during the period between going to sleep and the rude awakening.

To his cold, calculating mind, this was irrational. He had no knowledge whatever that he had dreamed about anything, and it was the more unlikely, as he was a man who rarely dreamt.

He would at once have discarded the thought, if it had not been for the possibility that he might have dreamed, and failed utterly to remember anything of his dream on the return to normal consciousness.

Even then, he would not have seriously considered the point, but for the fact that he intuitively had a strong impression he had dreamed. Here again he appeared to be getting off the beaten track—there was no evidence at all that he had dreamed, but why that impression ? It was so very strong, he could not utterly disregard it. He smiled slightly, as he thought that if he had discarded all such impressions he would not have been alive at the present time. His experience

had taught him that some things which appeared most unreasonable, were only so because they were not understood.

One other point occurred to him as rather curious. The tower-room (his study) had two windows, one facing east and the other west. Now, on each occasion when he had gone through this strange experience, it had always been at the east window where he had discovered himself!

There was no apparent reason why such small points as these should be taken into serious consideration. There was no basis even upon which to formulate anything with regard to them; only the man had had too broad an experience of life to be "sure" of things, and he therefore reserved his decision.

Still thinking, he at last fell into a quiet sleep, and for the time being ceased to be troubled with the pros and cons of the case. He breathed easily and regularly, and his strong face showed little, if any, trace of the strain to which he had been subjected just over an hour ago.

That was not unnatural, for he had lived a hard life, and, as mentioned before, nine years of it in parts of the East, where foreigners are apt to carry their lives in their hands, so to speak, and get accustomed to shocks and precarious positions.

During that long absence from England, he had become imbued with Eastern lore, and his knowledge of it was radical and extensive. Being half an Eastern, channels of learning were open to him which are barred to the Westerner, and of that he had taken full advantage.

His study of psychology, as understood by the

Western schools of thought, had left him hungry for more knowledge. He had discovered that there were great gaps in it, and he determined, if it lay in his power, to fill them. So to that end he gave the best years of his life, making exhaustive research in the homeland of his mother's people, often risking his life in obtaining results upon which he could securely build. And he had not sought and worked in vain. Later on, the value of his research was recognised by Europe.

Incidentally, his knowledge was to stand him in good stead before very long. The time was not far distant when certain human lives, which seemed to be at the mercy of unknown powers, were saved mainly through the application of that learning which he had acquired.

When he awoke it was past eight o'clock, and the sunlight was streaming brightly into the room. Rousing himself, he descended to his bedchamber, bathed, dressed, and went downstairs to the breakfast-room.

After ordering his morning meal, he proceeded to open the letters. These he glanced through rapidly, and placed them in a little heap on his left hand, with the exception of one, which he carefully read through again. It was that which the Vicar of Worlstoke had written to him the previous day.

Mr. Brentwood frowned and pinched his under lip with his finger and thumb. What could it be that would cause Mr. Alletson to come to him for help? In their different ways, the Vicar and he were fairly good friends. They had one or two interests in common, and had spent many a

pleasant hour together, after the ice had been broken.

At first he had been inclined to think that the Vicar had ulterior motives with regard to his parish and church, and had been greatly surprised to find that he never mentioned them. That was just as he wished it to be, for he was not a Churchman, and had no desire to take any part in Church work.

But that letter made him feel a little uneasy; it looked as if Mr. Alletson were at last going to introduce "business." The Master of Storton looked hard at the coffee-pot. If the Vicar did, it was probable there would be an end to future pleasant hours. Neither by money nor action would he support the Church of England, or any other Church; and if the Vicar had any such idea in his mind, well!——

Here he began to attack his breakfast, with unusual vigour. The truth was not always agreeable, and it was quite within the bounds of possibility that Mr. Alletson would be offended.

Having finished his repast, he went into the library and wrote the following note:

"STORTON MANOR,
SOMERSETSHIRE.
21st April 19—.

"DEAR MR. ALLETSON,—I shall be at home to-morrow, Thursday, at eleven o'clock A.M. If I can be of any assistance, I shall be happy to help you, so long as it does not clash with my principles. I shall expect you to stay to lunch.—Yours sincerely, H. A. BRENTWOOD."

Before sealing the note, he carefully read it over again, and after a few minutes' hesitation decided it would do.

He did not wish to give offence in any way, if he could help it, yet he was quite clear in his mind that he must give a hint to the Vicar that he would not help in a matter with which he was not in sympathy.

Little did he guess into what strange paths of mystery and evil the subject about which his friend wanted to consult him would lead them both! Had he known then, what the next few months were to bring forth, it is doubtful whether he would have seen the Vicar at all.

But then, the future is seldom revealed, and perhaps (who can tell?) it is better for humanity that most things are not foreseen.

CHAPTER V

STRANGE CONFIDENCES

AGAR HALFI, the Hindoo, sat on the floor of the living-room of his lodge, with legs crossed in true Eastern fashion. The table on which he usually had his meals had been pushed back against the wall, and he sat on the hearthrug, looking steadily into the fire. In his hand was a piece of paper, upon which were drawn strange hieroglyphics. At intervals he stared at them doubtfully, as though trying to solve some problem, the key of which he had mislaid.

In the right-hand corner of the fireplace, underneath a large cupboard fixed in the wall, a great bull-mastiff sat, winking lazily at the flames. In this he seemed to be at one with his companion, though what was passing through his canine mind is a matter of conjecture. Occasionally he opened his tremendous mouth, and yawned indifferently, as though to show his contempt for the trivial thing that was perplexing the man.

No doubt, to him, men were always funny creatures, but to see one of them—and above all one for whom he had much respect—worrying over strange characters on a bit of paper, was enough to make even a grave dog like Hector smile.

Still, he had had his breakfast, and Agar Halfi's peculiarities didn't really matter, so long as he

(Hector) could blink at the warm fire, undisturbed. This kind of madness which sometimes came over his friend had its advantages, for so long as the Hindoo wasted his time soliloquising over the fire, Hector knew that he could sit in peace. He preferred Agar Halfi's sitting-room to his kennel, and the longer his friend brooded, the longer he could stay.

It was a dull, cold morning, and Agar Halfi and the dog, who had both been out since daybreak, were each in his own way enjoying the rest and the warmth of the fire. Hardly a sound broke the stillness, except the monotonous ticking of an old grandfather's clock, and the occasional dropping of the fire, as it gradually burned away.

The Hindoo might have sat thus for hours; he was almost dead to external things, but that the grandfather's clock, after giving a warning whirr-r-r-r, slowly struck the hour of ten. This interruption broke his train of thought, for he looked up and noted the time. Then turning his attention to the dog, he gazed at him steadily for about half a minute. The animal was too much absorbed in the fire to be greatly disturbed by that, but the restless movement of his eyes denoted he was well aware of the attention that was being paid to him. At length the man exclaimed:

"Hector!"

The dog pricked up his ears, instinctively, but beyond that did not move.

The Hindoo looked at him, half in sorrow, half in anger.

"Hector, you lazy beast, there is going to be trouble for you and me. What do you think of that?"

Except for a slight movement of his tail, which indicated that he had heard, the dog did not stir; but continued to blink at the fire.

"Do you understand, son of a thief?" continued Agar Halfi impressively. "For all I know, before this moon dies, aye, before it reaches the full, you will only be carrion fit for the crows to pick."

Even this startling outlook did not appear to upset Hector; he only wagged his tail a little more. What was going to happen in the dim future was no concern of his. What no doubt did trouble him, was the fact that now the Hindoo had roused himself, it would soon be time to go to his kennel; and though clean straw and litter were nice and warm, a fire—well, it was a luxury.

Agar Halfi glowered at him sternly:

"Sometimes you have the soul of a respectable being, but get you near a fire, and you have the soul of a pig. Do you understand—outcast?"

Hector dropped his head a little at the other's reprimanding tone, but did not move.

"Come here!"

The dog yawned in a bored sort of fashion, and slowly getting on to his legs, shambled rather than walked over to Agar Halfi, and licked his cheek.

The Hindoo put out his arm, and seizing hold of the loose skin of the animal's neck, pushed him vigorously away.

"Lie down, idiot!" he exclaimed.

In nowise disconcerted by this discourteous treatment, Hector obediently stretched his great length on the hearthrug, close by his friend, and rested his muzzle on his two paws.

Agar Halfi again turned his eyes to the fire, and for a long while he sat thus, motionless, except for the slight heave of his chest, and the occasional movement of his lips as he whispered strange words to himself.

At length he rose, and going over to the cupboard, took from a shelf a roll of papers. Resuming his seat, he began to look them through. The first three he put on the rug after a cursory glance at each, the fourth he stopped to look at a little longer. When he had finished with it, he put it on the dog's back, and said :

" That's yours, my friend, and a worse nativity I've never seen—at least for some things." He paused and looked into the animal's big brown eyes, but the dog only blinked at him unconcernedly, so Agar Halfi continued :

" Do you know, dolt, that you will probably die a violent death ? "

Hector wagged his tail as though the idea pleased him. Perhaps he believed in the old saying that a man (or a dog for that matter) can only die once, so it does not matter how, when, or where.

The Hindoo looked at him sardonically. What was the use of talking to a brute, some would say ? But ah, what he said to the dog he knew would not be repeated, and he said a good many things to Hector that he would not have trusted to a man.

" If you only had sense enough, I might be able to show you how to avoid it, but you haven't. Still, the soul of you is better than the souls of most men, for you are honest, and faithful, even

if you have weaknesses for a fire, and raw meat; and perhaps I may be able to help you out of that hole, my friend."

Hector snorted indifferently, as much as to say, "I don't know what you are talking about, and I don't much care."

The Hindoo turned again to the roll of papers, and at last pulled out one that he wanted. It represented the horoscope of the Master of Storton, for in the left-hand top corner was inscribed "H. A. B., 17th January 18—." Underneath was a square map of the heavens, divided into twelve houses, showing the zodiacal signs, with the places of the planets noted therein for the time of birth. Below this was a list of computations, probably the directions of the horoscope.

Agar Halfi ran his eye down the latter, until he came to the following: "Zod. D.D. 39 years 5 months. ☽ ☌ ♆ □ ♂!"

He studied the symbols closely. He had no doubt about the calculations, he had compiled them himself, and checked them twice. This was the fortieth year of Mr. Brentwood's life, and these aspects, especially the evil aspect of the moon to Mars, had been active since the beginning of the year.

Slowly he read the rest of the directions, until he came to the bottom of the page, and there his eye was arrested by a note, which was as follows:

"At the time of the new, or full Moon, should the Sun enter the fifth house of the heavens, you will be in danger of your life from four-footed beasts. In your 40th year, when at that time the planet

Neptune throws its evil rays to the lesser luminary, you will be subject to strange and weird experiences; and should the planet Mars cast an adverse ray, a violent death will encompass you."

The Hindoo drew in a long breath. "That is Fate," he muttered. "It is what is written." Then he smiled a grim smile. "Strong men can overcome Fate!"

He turned suddenly, and eyed the dog intently, at the same time exclaiming:

"And your master also will probably die a violent death!"

Hector received this piece of information quite undisturbed, looking calmly at the man with his big soft eyes. Agar Halfi returned the dog's gaze mechanically, his mind being engrossed with the paragraph at the bottom of Mr. Brentwood's horoscope.

Suddenly Hector pricked his ears, jumped up, and went over to the door. He sniffed loudly at the bottom of it, as though uncertain, and then wagged his tail. The next moment footsteps sounded outside, there was a low knock, and Agar Halfi rose to face the Master of Storton.

For some moments the two men looked at each other in silence, the Hindoo with solemn eyes, the other with half-smiling sarcastic ones.

At last Brentwood said easily:

"Well, is there anything that is not quite as it should be?"

Agar Halfi shrugged his shoulders as he replied:

"I feel that the Sahib has been subjected to a severe mental strain."

The Master of Storton laughed oddly as he

seated himself on the edge of the table, and nodded his head by way of acquiescence.

"That is true, but surely I don't show it in my countenance ? "

The Hindoo smiled at the remark.

"No," he retorted. "The Master of Storton seldom shows anything by his face."

Brentwood looked amused, as he replied questioningly : "If my face did not show it, how did you know ? "

"Surely the Sahib knows that as well as I do," was the solemn answer. "You came here to tell me something. When we met, that something was dominating your mind. We looked at each other, my mind became attuned to yours —ascended or descended to the same plane of consciousness. What you wanted to say was being projected from your mind along this particular plane, and my mind being on the same plane, the thought naturally came to my understanding."

"Not only that, Agar Halfi, but the thought returned from your mind to mine, and I became aware that you were cognisant of that which I wanted to convey to you. It is what we in England call telepathy, and it has recently been fairly well established as a scientific truth."

The Hindoo laughed sarcastically. "Surely, Sahib, the ancients used it long ago ! "

"I don't doubt that," returned the other; "at any rate, it would be difficult to explain some things that they accomplished, without the medium of telepathy. I was merely saying that Western thought had only just discovered it."

"And," added Agar Halfi, "will go on discovering other things which are not new."

The Master of Storton acquiesced with a sigh. "I'm afraid that Western civilisation is too much absorbed in amassing worldly wealth at present to get much more forward in things that really matter; consequently, the higher faculties of the race can only develop very slowly. Still, what I came to tell you is, that last night I had another of those queer experiences."

Here the Master of Storton related, as far as he could remember, what took place.

"What do you make of it?"

The Hindoo slowly shook his head. "I cannot grasp it, except that it seems to bear out that which is foretold in your nativity."

"You mean, I take it, that concerning my being in danger of a violent death about this period of my life?" remarked Brentwood coolly.

"Quite so," answered Agar Halfi. "Those experiences of yours are psychic ones, which are all traceable to the influence of the rays from the planet Neptune, and it is that planet which is at the present time evilly active in your life."

A silence followed the Hindoo's last remark. At length, rising from the table with a grim sort of "umph," the Master of Storton took from his pocket the letter which he had that morning received from the Vicar of Worlstoke, and handed it to his companion. Agar Halfi read it through carefully, then handed it back. "You will see him, I suppose, Sahib?"

"Yes, I have written saying I will. I am rather curious to know what he wants to consult

me about so particularly. What do you make of it ? "

"When I held the letter in my hands I had an impression, but it may not be of any consequence," remarked the Hindoo indifferently.

"One never knows," replied Brentwood. "Tell me what it was ? "

Agar Halfi characteristically shrugged his shoulders, as he replied :

"Simply that it indirectly concerned you ! "

"Me ! " exclaimed the other. He looked thoughtfully at the wall, then continued : "Maybe, but it is hardly possible."

"Do you require the car to-day ? "

"No ; I have to go to Westsea, but I shall walk, and," glancing at the dog, "Hector may as well come with me." Saying which, he called the animal to him and went out.

For some minutes Agar Halfi stood looking solemnly after his retreating figure, then once more shrugging his shoulders, he resumed his examination of the Master of Storton's horoscope.

CHAPTER VI

A SAINT AND A SINNER

On Thursday morning, at the appointed hour, the Rev. Philip Alletson made his way to the Manor. The maid who answered the door admitted him immediately, and conducted him up to the tower study.

His host was not there, so he went and seated himself upon the "Chesterfield" that filled the recess of the west window. Considering the short time he had been at Worlstoke, he knew the room well. Many a pleasant hour had he spent in it with his friend, over a game of chess, or in discussing mutually interesting subjects.

He always felt at home in this room, with its comfortably arranged furniture. There was a sense of Eastern luxury in it, conveyed no doubt by the beautifully figured tapestry that draped the north and south walls; the thick, richly coloured rugs that covered the well-polished floor, and the heavily upholstered furniture. In fact, the only article of modern appearance was a plain leather-topped writing-desk in the east window, supplemented by a business-like swivel oak chair.

As he thought of these things he grew easier, and the doubt he had about Brentwood's attitude respecting what he was going to say, almost disappeared.

He gave a sigh of relief, and turning his head,

looked out of the window. Far away over the rich fields he could see the restless changing sea, sweeping across the Bristol Channel; while to the south he could just discern the end of the low-water pier of Westsea. It was a beautiful view, with the rich green fields running almost to the edge of the bay. Here and there amongst the green were farms and cottages, while splashes of white at irregular intervals denoted the winding road that ran from the shore through Storton to the old priory at Melsea.

While thus absorbed, the door quietly opened, and his host entered noiselessly. Seeing that his visitor was preoccupied, he took advantage of the fact to contemplate him at his leisure.

"Yes," he thought, "the Vicar has a good face, there is strength in it too, shown by the firmly set mouth and jaw." Here he paused, surveying him critically. "Eyes rather too closely set, tending to narrowness, but that to some extent obviated by a fairly broad brow. Temperament nervous, very nervous." He almost said "unfortunately so," but instead he only said "umph," which observation caused the Vicar to turn suddenly round.

He rose immediately, and crossing the room, shook hands with his host, who, in his quiet way, greeted him cordially enough.

The contrast between the two men was very marked, as they stood facing each other. The one tall and slender, with grey eyes set in a rather stern face, almost ascetic, his temperament highly strung and imaginative. The other, half Eastern,

with dark skin, deep brown dreamy eyes, and closely cropped black hair, yet heavily built, denoting great physical strength, full-blooded and healthy, and possessed of a cool and calculating mind, that rarely lost its balance.

"I hope," began the Vicar, "you will forgive this informality. Really, I——"

"Oh, that is all right," interrupted the other. "If the matter is so important as your note indicates, there is no question of formality. Let's get seated and then you can begin."

Alletson settled himself down in one of the comfortable chairs, and then comprehensively and concisely related his experience of the Monday night, right down to when he lost consciousness in the summer arbour.

Here he paused and looked at Brentwood, who had been gazing out of the window while he was speaking. The silence caused the other to glance round, and for a minute he eyed his friend questioningly. Then he rose slowly, and approaching him, said shortly, "Let me feel your pulse."

The Vicar drew in his breath and started forward in his chair. This was just what he had dreaded. Was he going to laugh at him? However, he controlled himself and held out his left arm.

The Master of Storton watched the second hand of his watch, in silent ease. When he had finished, he resumed his seat and, without saying anything, returned his gaze to the window, waiting for the other to proceed.

There was a pause. The Vicar did not quite understand. He was not aware that his host was

a doctor, and it looked as though he were joking. Before he proceeded any further he must know in what light he viewed the narrative.

"Do you take me seriously?" he asked rather coldly.

The other turned and slightly lifted his brows.

"Why should I not?"

Alletson looked relieved.

"I hardly understood your testing my pulse."

Brentwood looked enlightened and replied:

"Oh, I see. I simply did that just to prove to myself that you were normal. Will you please proceed? I take it that you have not told me all you want to say?"

"To be quite plain," continued Alletson, "I believe there is some power at large in the neighbourhood, something evil, and that it has caused the disappearance of Elsie Hobson and Henry Thornton!"

Brentwood faced round with a jerk. He was not necessarily surprised, but this conclusion seemed to cause him to concentrate his attention.

"What should make you think it has caused the disappearance of those two people, presuming that such a power as you have mentioned is at large?"

The Vicar shrugged his shoulders in despair. Here he felt he might fail with his neighbour. These scientific men were such sticklers for hard facts, and he had none of those facts to give.

"I am afraid I cannot satisfactorily answer that, but let me be as explicit as I can. Inwardly I feel quite sure about it. Somehow or other I *know;* just the same as I know that there is a

sympathetic link between you and me, though I could not explain it."

Brentwood got up and walked to the window, and for a space looked out silently. He felt he had somewhat misjudged this man. He was almost certain before he came that the matter he wished to discuss was something to do with the Church, and he regretted that even in thought he should have wronged him. At last he walked back to his chair and said :

" Cannot you give me any idea why you should think such a thing ? Haven't you any train of thought which leads up to it ? "

" To be quite frank, No ! But I ' sense ' it."

" ' Sense ' it ? " echoed his host. " Excuse me cross-examining, Alletson, but it is necessary if we are to arrive at a common basis. What do you mean by ' sense ' it ? "

The Vicar thought for a minute.

" It would be very difficult for me to explain that ; but really I think you understand what I mean."

His friend looked grimly amused.

" You repose a lot of confidence in me. Do you know how the scientific mind interprets that word when it is used (or rather I should say ' abused ') outside its ordinary meaning ? "

" No, I don't."

" Imagination."

A hard expression came into Alletson's eyes. Brentwood noticed it, for he added quickly :

" But I quite understand that that is not what you wished to convey to me. What you mean, I

take it, is, outside your known five physical senses, you have, through one or more as yet unknown senses, become cognisant of this evil force. Is not that so ? "

His friend looked relieved.

" That's exactly what I mean. It is a similar sensing to that which one has when, say, going out of an ordinary room into a cathedral. Do you understand ? "

The other laughed. " Yes, I do understand, although your analogy might easily be explained away by the different structure of the two buildings. Remember that the vastness of a cathedral and the ominous silence usually connected with it naturally impress one with a feeling of littleness and consequently of awe. But what made me laugh was the fact that your explanation reminded me of a so-called Eastern mystery which I came across in Circassia. There are two caves in one of the mountains of the Caucasus, very nearly alike. One is called ' Evil,' wherein the devil is supposed to dwell, and the other ' Good,' where God resides. The rogues who run this show invite guileless strangers to see for themselves, solemnly warning them not to treat the mystery lightly, as they are in the hands of powerful influences.

" The effect is remarkable. You are shown firstly into the cave ' Good,' and soon you are astonished at the happy feeling that comes over you. Then you go into the cave ' Evil,' similar in size, shape, and appearance to the other, and in about two minutes most people gladly come out, with a feeling that their hair is standing on end. It is

merely a clever trick of Oriental magic. However, to return to the main path; I take it you seriously want me to probe this matter ? "

" To that end I have come here with the fixed intention of obtaining your co-operation, if it is possible."

Brentwood thought seriously for a time. At last he said :

" Have you had any practical experience of things of this nature ? "

The Vicar hesitated somewhat.

" Well, I can hardly say. I have studied hypnotism fairly closely, also magic, but I'm afraid I know more of the theory than the practice of either."

His host looked interested.

" Have you had any results ? "

" In hypnotism, yes; I've had some queer results. When in the third, or trance stage, my sister—with whom I conducted the experiments —forewarned me of a serious breakdown in health which came true. On one occasion she, apparently without any effort, told me where to find my signet ring, which I had mislaid some three months previously and given up for lost. That was done when the matter was far from my mind, in fact, almost forgotten. Another time she exclaimed in a joyous voice that she was free and was going away. For an hour or more I could not get her to speak, and I was beginning to feel uneasy. All the colour had left her face and her breathing was hardly perceptible. At last, much to my relief, she began to come round, and then she

started to upbraid me, saying I was cruel to call her back, and entreating me to let her go again. Unfortunately she could not remember anything of this episode when in the normal state. These in particular, and some minor results, I have had."

The Master of Storton opened his eyes widely. He had no idea his friend had progressed that far in such a study. He was really surprised, though he did not say so.

"Have you had any experience of vampires, werewolves, or anything of the kind?"

The Vicar laughed.

"Of course I've read about them, if that's what you mean."

Brentwood repeated his question, though this time he emphasised the word "experience."

His friend looked at him in amazement.

"No! certainly not. But surely you don't mean to suggest that such things exist except in legend?"

His host surveyed him calmly, and there was a suggestion of mockery in his eyes. How was it, he thought, that so many folk jumped to conclusions upon certain things, particularly of this stamp, without attempting to verify them? Here was a man intellectually in the prime of life, well-educated and well-read, who, while admitting that he knew practically nothing about them—excepting what he had casually read—was satisfied that they did not exist! It was irritating.

"Have you ever travelled in the East?"

"No, I've never been further than Italy."

"You know that I have spent some years out there?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what I was doing?"

The Vicar looked a little guilty. He was conscious that he had sought information about his neighbour; not bluntly, but had taken opportunities when they occurred to obtain knowledge of him.

"Well, I understand that you were engaged in pyschological research."

"Quite so. Incidentally, I had to investigate other things closely connected with it, and my experiences have led me to grave conclusions. To be quite plain, I am convinced that the existence of so-called vampires and werewolves is not based on myth. Some of the extraordinary phenomena I have witnessed and dealt with have settled that point in my mind, beyond doubt; though there is of course a good deal of superstition mixed up with the matter and its origin is obscure."

Alletson studied the carpet. His friend's tone was serious and sincere; besides, so far as he knew, Brentwood was not a man to play with words. But this was remarkable news; it had never occurred to him that there could possibly be any truth in such things—it was generally taken for granted that they were myth, and that idea was so firmly implanted in his mind it could not be eradicated at once.

"It is difficult to believe," he said, "though I cannot contradict what you say; but it seems incredible."

"The tricks of the illusionist seem incredible until we find out how they are done," was the terse reply. "But let me remind you, as Shakespeare said, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' We are too apt to take things for granted. The tendency of the present age seems to be: We know this and we know that; what we don't know is not. Could anything be more arrogant? Is it not more rational to allow that things which appear to be impossible may be, than to assume that what we don't know cannot be?"

The Vicar smiled interestedly.

"If," he replied, "I am to take up the cudgels for modern thought, I would answer that although it is argued that what we don't know is not, the analysis of it is that though a thing may exist, it is unknowable to us, and therefore, as far as we are concerned, it is not."

"Your answer is the one that is usually put forward; but do you take that view yourself?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Beyond a certain point, I trust largely to intuition; and no reasoning I can bring to bear can affect that view."

Brentwood half closed his eyes.

"If I may say so, I take it that that applies to you in your religion?"

The Vicar was silent a moment, then, looking straight at his friend, replied frankly:

"Certainly, no broad-minded cleric would attempt to narrow down his religion to a creed."

"Quite so," said the other; "and yet a few

minutes ago you did not make use of the same principle when I mentioned werewolves and vampires."

"That is true," answered the Vicar; "but is not your analogy a little irrelevant? There is a reasonable basis for philosophy and also for religion; but I don't think you can say that much for vampires, et cetera. Someone may have dreamed of such things very vividly in the first place, and believed they were actually real. Besides, there is no evidence upon which to build."

Brentwood smiled a little satirically.

"I'm afraid I must contradict you there, and proof of what I say would make my analogy relevant. But be that as it may, what strikes me so very palpably is, that where a thing is bred in one's blood and bone—like Christianity for nearly two thousand years, and like the belief in vampires and werewolves for a much longer period still—no amount of antipathetic environment seems able to entirely eradicate it; and, consequently, educated people of all nationalities unconsciously give themselves certain latitude with their own particular racial peculiarities, *i.e.* allow their intuitive faculties to play upon them. But when it comes to another person's national eccentricities, Oh no, that is idle legend!"

The Vicar, who had listened attentively, took a long breath. There was undoubtedly reason in his friend's argument, but he spoke in such a confident tone that it slightly irritated him. Usually the boot was on the other foot—it was the clerical mind that adopted that attitude. He smiled amusedly

as he thought of the many times he had seen and heard his colleagues speak thus.

" You are very confident," he said at last. " Are you so absolutely sure of what you say? For instance, how can you speak with authority about the hereditary instincts of the Eastern races; although you have studied them, you cannot actually know what they feel? "

" Perhaps the simplest way of answering," replied the other, " is to tell you at once that I am not an Englishman. There is Hindoo blood in me from my mother, who was half a Circassian."

He paused to see what effect his words would have on the Vicar, but the latter, if surprised, did not give vent to it; he merely nodded his head, and his friend continued:

" So you see I'm fairly capable of judging from that standpoint, as well as from a Western one. However, to return to the subject of your call. Do I understand that Miss Alletson is mediumistic? "

" Yes, she has power in that way."

" Is she aware of what you have told me? "

" No. I have not mentioned anything to her. I did not see that it could serve any useful purpose at present. On the other hand, I concluded that it might upset her peace of mind."

" Have you any other reason for withholding this matter from her? "

" No," he replied, " but I see no reason why I should inform her."

" Well, I think she could assist us in no small degree."

"Indeed!"

Their eyes met, and for a time they looked at each other. He could not have said why, but the first thought that entered Alletson's head was one of resentment. No, he would not draw Constance into it. But the thought vanished for the time, almost as soon as it was born.

His host seemed to read it, for he said quietly:

"I think you may take my word for it that no harm would come to your sister. So far as I am aware, it would only be necessary for her to act as the medium of one or two experiments, which appear to me essential if we are to obtain any clue. But of course, if you would rather not draw her into the case, I will not pursue the matter further."

The Vicar was silent. There was really no good reason to refuse, yet he could not help but realise that he wanted to do so. While he hesitated, his sister's words, "Promise you will let me know all that you do," came back to his memory and decided his answer:

"Very well, I'll put the position to her, but of course she must decide for herself."

"I take it," said Brentwood drily, "that you wish to keep things as quiet as possible, at any rate for the time being, and the fact of your sister being the medium would ensure secrecy. Moreover, she is to some extent acquainted with the case."

"Quite so, quite so," replied the Vicar. "I have little doubt but that she will be willing to assist us."

"There is just one more thing I would like to add," went on the Master of Storton. "I shall want to take into my confidence, in a matter of this kind, my chauffeur, Agar Halfi, the Hindoo."

Alletson looked up a little surprised as he replied:

"Certainly, if you think it necessary."

"Well," continued the other, "I do. He has had great experience of such matters, besides the fact that he was with me during all my travels. Now, I don't think we can get much further at present, and I am sure you must be hungry. Let us go and have some lunch."

CHAPTER VII

GRAVE SUSPICIONS

ARTHUR SHEPPERTON held the position of managing clerk to the firm of solicitors Dalby & Co., Westsea. He was fully qualified in his profession, Mr. Dalby having some six years back given him his articles ; and the future held bright prospects of a junior partnership.

He was a business-like young man, and had earned the confidence of his employer by industry and perseverance ; added to which, he had, during the twenty-eight years of his existence, led a careful and regular life, if somewhat narrow and confined, and bided fair to become a highly respected and successful citizen.

From his point of view, life's outlook was a rosy one, and but for unforeseen circumstances he would probably have lived the life of a respectable middle-class person until his death—unconsciously ground between the millstones of Capital and Labour, as most middle-class people are.

Now unforeseen circumstances have a nasty knack of upsetting the quiet trend of people's lives, particularly those people who least want their lives interfered with. There is a certain section of the community—probably the mainstay of the country—which desires nothing more than to be able to work honestly and live respectably in peace ; and yet it

is frequently from this class that "Fate" draws individuals to play aggressive parts in the world.

The disappearance of Elsie Hobson (his fiancée) had been a great blow to Arthur Shepperton; indeed it seemed to completely daze him for a time. Outwardly he had sustained it well enough, but inwardly the effect was different. It seemed to have awakened some unfortunate trait in his character, long dormant, which would in all probability never have manifested under ordinary circumstances.

The humdrum everyday life of the average person does not tend to bring out true character—rather the reverse; nor does it help to make character. It is the exceptional and violent incidents in our lives that mould the real self; whether for good or evil, depends upon some law about which we know little or nothing; all we can say for certain is, that one of these exceptional occurrences may strike an evolutionary note in the individual, or, on the other hand, may develop an atavistic tendency.

In this particular case the violent incident, instead of encouraging the nobler tendencies, gave a fillip to the revengeful instinct; and after the first effects of the shock had passed away, Arthur Shepperton was left in a rather dangerous state of mind. He bitterly resented the fact that he should have to suffer as he did for no apparent reason, and he strongly desired to be revenged on someone or something, though he was not clear on whom or what. If he had stopped to reason, he would have seen the futility of such a course; but his mind was distorted and dominated by the primitive instinct referred to.

Mr. Dalby had shown him generous sympathy in

his trouble, and had released him indefinitely from his business duties. Thus it happened that the morning after the interview between the Vicar and Brentwood, related in the last chapter, Arthur Shepperton found himself by the old priory, after a long and lonely walk.

He felt tired, and was much relieved to see an old rustic seat under a tree. Making his way to it, he sat down thankfully, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands.

He was depressed, in spite of the bright morning and cheerful sunshine, and stared at the ruined building before him with expressionless eyes.

The whole problem of Elsie's disappearance baffled him completely; he had no clue whatever that might lead him to a solution. That was the worst of it, he was merely groping in the dark, with the faint hope that he would soon be able to drop on something which might lead to an explanation. What a relief it would be to his brain if he could only act, even with but the slightest idea that he was on the right track.

Almost mechanically he once more began to go over the few facts of the case which were known to him, but his mind would not act normally, and try as he would to control them, he could not get his thoughts to run in sequence.

Somehow or other he found himself wondering, in a dreamy sort of way, what the monks were like who used to inhabit the priory. He was not the least bit interested, it did not matter to him; but the idea would keep cropping up just when he was trying to connect one point with another.

Every now and then the question kept coming into his head, "What could have happened?" He wished he could get rid of that query. It had been hammered into his brain for the last fortnight and had become wearisome.

Once (and he laughed derisively as he thought of it) the idea had entered his head that the late Vicar and Elsie had prearranged it all and gone away together! Eloped!! Why should he think of such a thing? He should be the last to entertain a theory of that kind. He would have been ashamed to suggest it to anyone, and as a fact had discarded the idea as soon as it appeared. Yet he could not help feeling that it *was* possible, and he was uncomfortably aware that they had been great friends.

He sighed wearily; why could he not forget all about it? Why should he have all this trouble? His face sank into his hands, and he looked restfully into the blackness caused by the pressure of his fingers on his eyelids. Tired out, he half dozed, and again began to think about the monks. After all, it was a relief to let his mind play at random, after the last two weeks of mental storm and physical exertion.

He fancied he saw several of them walking slowly along, chanting some mournful air. The prior, a tall gaunt man with raven black curly hair, brought up the rear of the procession. His hands were crossed on his breast and he seemed deeply engrossed in some weighty problem. Walking in double file, they approached a door in the wall, through which they gradually disappeared. He counted them as they went through, and was just wondering whether

the prior would shut the door after him, when he was aware that that individual had suddenly turned round and was looking at him with a pair of fierce dark eyes, that flamed like fire. Just for a moment and then the vision vanished, and he started into wakefulness, instinctively sure that he had heard someone cough! He looked up at the priory, the direction from which the sound came, and listened. Who could be there at that time of the day? It was barely seven o'clock. Quietly rising, he stepped noiselessly across the grass to the doorway in the wall, the one by which he fancied he saw the monks disappear, and looked through. Seeing no one, he walked cautiously on until, rounding a corner of a ruined wall, his eyes came in contact with something which brought him to a halt. . . . Seated upon the floor of what once used to be the chapel was a man writing or drawing something upon the stone flags. So deeply was he engrossed, that evidently he had not heard anyone approach. Shepperton eyed him curiously, and his interest all at once increased as he recognised who it was.

His first thought was to make known his presence; but something—probably his legal training—caused him to alter his mind. For one thing, although *he* knew Mr. Brentwood, the latter did not know him. Besides, the situation rather appealed to the detective in his nature, and there was something so out of the ordinary, that Shepperton was curious to know what was going to happen.

He watched for about a minute, and then withdrawing carefully, silently retraced his footsteps to the door in the wall; but instead of passing

through to the left, he went on along the path for about six yards and turned sharply round the chapel wall to the right. Here he would wait until the gentleman had finished his early mass! When he had gone, it would be very interesting to go and inspect his handiwork.

If it did occur to Shepperton that it was not quite the thing to spy upon someone else, that was outweighed by his resentment towards this man, who, ever since he came to live in the neighbourhood, had shown quite plainly that he wished to be left alone. That of itself was sufficient to cause resentment in a nature like Shepperton's. He judged the man to be selfish; moreover, he was conscious of the fact that Brentwood had remained silent all through the little storm caused by Elsie's disappearance—apparently unmoved by the tragedy. Yes, it would be interesting to find out what *did* have any attraction for this very reserved person.

He must have stood there quite ten minutes before he heard Brentwood moving about. Just after, his approaching footsteps resounded on the hard path; and Shepperton's heart jumped a little, as it all at once occurred to him that Brentwood might possibly come to where he was standing. It would not be pleasant to be found thus; at the very least it would require some explanation. He breathed more freely as he heard the door in the wall close, and when the sound of the receding footsteps had almost died away, he quickly made his way to the chapel.

To his surprise and disappointment he did not discover anything. That was very strange; surely the man was doing something there, his eyes did not

deceive him about that. Very carefully, he scrutinised the flagstones round about where Brentwood had been sitting, but could not make anything of them. It was annoying, for he certainly was drawing or writing when Shepperton saw him. He was about to go away unsatisfied, when his eyes alighted on something white, lying on the floor. Picking it up, he discovered it to be a plain manilla envelope, neither sealed nor addressed. There was, however, something inside, which on examination proved to be a photograph. Not an ordinary one by any means, for it represented what was evidently a human hand, and the impression of a bird's foot, but the latter was more than five times as large as the former! The great difference in the relative sizes was so apparent, that he could not help at once noticing it. Shepperton looked at it intently for a minute, then carefully putting it back in the envelope, slipped it into his breast pocket. He stood for a short space, thinking earnestly, then, turning sharply round, made his way home as quickly as he could.

On reaching his apartments he went straight to his sitting-room, and after locking the door—he was very cautious in some things—took out the photograph and thoroughly examined it. Having satisfied himself that there was no name or mark on it, except the initials "H. A. B.," he got an inch rule and accurately measured the impression of the foot, which he found to be nearly four inches long, whereas the hand was barely one inch! He thought of all the big birds he had heard of, but could not call to mind one that would have a foot anything like that. It was a queer sort of thing. The photograph of the hand

had evidently been taken to show the size of the foot ; but what the latter represented was an enigma. He would very much like to know, particularly as there could be little doubt about it having fallen out of Brentwood's pocket.

" Yes," he thought, " still waters run deep," and perhaps Brentwood had excellent reasons for not wishing to associate with ordinary human beings.

Now what could he have been up to in the priory ? It certainly looked as if he were engaged on something out of the way, at least. The more Shepperton thought it over, the more he became anxious to know what had happened ; and the more he thought of Brentwood, the more his dislike of him seemed to grow. From his own point of view, he had cause to know that he was cold, callous, and selfish, and he also felt that a man who secluded himself from his fellow-beings must have a reason for it ; that, he argued, was not likely to be a good one. Yes, he would watch the gentleman ; it might be that he would find something out very, *very* interesting. Meanwhile, the photograph would not come to any harm in his possession. He went and carefully locked it up in his desk, and as he turned the key, it struck him that perhaps the Vicar could enlighten him a little about Mr. Brentwood ? Yes, he would go and see him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INVOLVING OF CONSTANCE ALLETSON

CONSTANCE ALLETSON looked steadily out of her bedroom window at the viola border of her own flower patch, while she slowly buttoned on her gloves. She was going to the Manor with her brother, but did not feel quite at ease about it.

Philip had told her everything that happened at his interview with Mr. Brentwood, not even withholding his own weird experience; and after seriously thinking it over, she had decided—more from a sense of duty than anything else—to do all she could to assist her brother in his endeavours to clear up this strange case.

She was somewhat surprised that the Master of Storton should have shown any interest in it. She knew her brother well enough to believe that his point of view would hardly interest Mr. Brentwood, and she would have been quite unmoved if Philip had told her that his friend had laughed at him. From what she had gathered about scientific people, and from her experience of the few scientific men she had met, they were not the kind to look seriously at anything outside cut-and-dried facts, and she failed to understand why Mr. Brentwood should be an exception.

But it was not that which made her feel un-

easy ; rather she would have enjoyed pitting her knowledge and strength against the man. In this she differed from her brother, who, being extremely sensitive, would have taken pains to avoid such a measure. The fighting spirit was prominent in her nature, whereas with her brother it was not readily called into action.

No, it was a matter which, to her mind, was far more serious. There was something about Mr. Brentwood to which she was averse. She had no tangible reason for this dislike ; so far as she could make out, it was just instinctive. But that did not alter the fact of its existence, and although she would not even admit to herself such a thing, it almost amounted to fear ! It would be useless to explain things to her brother, because—manlike—he would immediately want to know what reason she had for it ; and she was only too well aware that men generally do not take account of woman's intuitive faculties—" fancies " they usually call them.

So it was with mixed feelings that she finished her toilet, and she half wished that her promise had not been given. But she was no weakling, and now that the first step had been taken, she would see it through, whatever the result.

The Master of Storton was sending his car over to fetch them ; and the hoot of the motor horn outside the gate brought her soliloquy to an abrupt end. Lightly descending the stairs, she met Philip in the hall and they went out together.

The door of the brougham was being held open by Agar Halfi, who saluted them respectfully. Constance noticed that he was very good-looking

and had intelligent eyes. Evidently he was a superior type of native, and she wondered how he came to be in Mr. Brentwood's service.

As they drove swiftly along she chatted gaily, being determined that whatever happened she would not give her brother cause to think she was at all uneasy.

He was very glad to find her in such an excellent humour, and his own spirits began to rise a little. He had entered on this quest with heavy misgivings, and the whole-heartedness with which his sister appeared to be taking the matter up was a great satisfaction.

"Do you know," she said, "I hardly like being driven by this chauffeur of Mr. Brentwood's; he is such a grand, dignified person, and although he saluted us so very respectfully, I am sure he considers he is our equal—his manner conveyed it."

The Vicar looked a little sternly at the back of the dark blue cushioned seat on the opposite side of the brougham before he replied.

"Do you mean to intimate that because he is dark-skinned he could not possibly be our equal?"

Constance laughed outright.

"How you do misconstrue my meanings. Of course I didn't mean to convey anything of the sort. What I did intimate was that it seems a shame he should have to act as our servant."

She paused, then added:

"I should rather like to talk to him; I'm sure he would be interesting."

Philip glanced at her a little surprised.

"You are not usually so keen about talking to

men of your own race. Why such a sudden fancy ? "

" Nothing strange about that at all," she said. " One thing, he looks so intelligent, and another, I cannot help feeling that he is a gentleman, in spite of his dark skin, which I am sorry to say I cannot state about all men of my own race."

Philip nodded his head reluctantly.

" Unfortunately, that is true. But it is not by any means easy to get Hindoos to talk, I understand ; they are a mysterious, reticent race, and very proud."

" I wonder how he came to get into Mr. Brentwood's service ? " she asked.

Her brother shook his head and smiled, then said :

" Probably he got attached to him during his travels in India."

" Oh ! " ejaculated Constance, surprised, " I had no idea Mr. Brentwood had been there."

She sat silently musing over it, and did not speak again until the slowing down of the car told them that they must be nearly at the Manor.

She had not been to Storton House before, and as they went slowly up the drive, she could not help admiring the well-kept grounds and beautiful flower-borders. Everything showed taste and care, right down to the grass edges, which were perfectly trimmed and cut.

Mr. Brentwood appeared almost immediately they crossed the threshold of his house, and Constance felt that while his greeting to her was perfectly correct, his manner was slightly awkward and certainly appeared to be cold. On the other hand

she saw that the two men spoke affably, calling each other by their surnames, which made her arch her brows a little ; she did not know they were on such intimate terms—Philip had never led her to understand that. Still, it was a pleasant surprise, for her brother was most unlikely to get very friendly with any sort of person, he was so reserved.

Once inside the room which their host had had prepared, Constance was more at ease. It was ideally comfortable, but not luxuriously so, and although the atmosphere was warm, it was fresh. She was charmed, too, with the profusion of magnificent flowers which seemed to be everywhere. It was such a delightful surprise to find them at that time of the year.

"Really, Mr. Brentwood," she exclaimed, "these are beautiful. I envy you."

Her host smiled quietly in acknowledgment, then answered :

"Flowers are one of my weaknesses ; I revel in them. But I have to thank my gardener for the luxury, he spares no pains to keep me well supplied."

Constance looked at him with interest. It was not common for men to thank their servants in that way for what they did. He seemed to regard it as a sort of favour from the tone of his voice.

Brentwood noticed her look and added :

"He is an artist in his profession, and I never interfere in his work, or I doubt if such results as you now see would be forthcoming. I am not skilled in the art of floriculture."

"Mr. Brentwood is too modest," laughed her

brother, " I myself have seen him hard at work in his own conservatory."

" Quite true," explained their host, " but only doing things under my gardener's supervision."

He is certainly different to other men, Constance thought—moreover, he is modest, no doubt about that. Further, it struck her that his remarks were singularly just.

There was a short silence, and then, turning to Constance and looking her fully in the face, Mr. Brentwood said :

" I understand, Miss Alletson, your brother has explained that what we are about to undertake is of serious import ? "

It was the first time their eyes had really met, and while he was speaking she felt that she could not look away ; they were such fine eyes, and there seemed to be no end to their deep brown depths. She was conscious that a great restful feeling came over her, such as she had never in her life experienced before.

While she paused to answer, she felt that she was searching for something in his look, which was concealed, but which she instinctively knew was there.

" Yes, I understand that."

She replied almost mechanically, her attention being held by the involuntary desire to discover what it was that lay hidden in the man.

" But I think you may rest assured that no personal harm will come to you."

Constance gave a short derisive laugh ! She did not mean to do so, but the position to her just then was so diametrically opposed to his assurance, that

she could not help it. She was beginning to feel uneasy. She wanted to avoid finding this strange hidden thing; her whole being repelled it, and she was aware that her uneasiness was fast amounting to real fear! With an effort she replied:

"It is very kind of you to be so thoughtful about me, but what of yourself and my brother?"

"Perhaps I can answer that, Constance," interposed the Vicar, "if Mr. Brentwood will allow me to speak for him, as well as for myself?"

Their host looked at him and nodded assent, and the Vicar continued:

"As you already know, Mr. Brentwood and I have decided to get to the bottom of this matter if at all possible. There are, however, certain risks, but we are prepared to accept these, while we are both agreed that you must not run any danger."

As the Master of Storton turned his eyes from hers, Constance gave a sigh of relief, for she almost immediately became her normal self again.

"I don't know whether to thank you for your consideration or not," she replied, a little reproachfully. "When I promised that I would help you, I was then, and am now, fully prepared to take my share of the responsibility. Moreover, why should I not?"

Brentwood raised his eyes with fresh interest. This woman evidently had a mind of her own.

"I think," he said gravely, "there is hardly any need to pursue this further, Miss Alletson, seeing that you are so willing to do your share in the work."

The well-conceived reply pacified Constance somewhat, so she answered:

"Very well, let it rest at that. But before we begin, I wish to make one stipulation"—here her eyes challenged his—"and that is, that you inform me of all that happens."

"Mr. Brentwood is quite willing on that point, I'm sure," answered her brother.

Their host rose, and moving forward a large divan chair, requested Constance to make herself as comfortable as possible. This, with the aid of one or two cushions, she did, and soon found herself reposing restfully.

She felt at ease, strange to say, in spite of the uncomfortable time she had experienced when Mr. Brentwood had been looking at her, but so far as she knew there was no other disturbing element. In any case, she had made up her mind, and would not retract now.

The Master of Storton was talking to her brother in a low voice, and she lazily watched them. Casually she compared the two men and smiled at the idea that they should have anything in common; they were so entirely different. Still, it appeared that they had, and, after all, it was not the strangest thing in the world.

At last Brentwood turned to her, and taking out his watch, said:

"I understand from your brother, Miss Alletson, that you have experienced the trance stage before, and that being so, I propose to conduct you there straight away. During the trance I shall request you to do certain things, which, if successful, will have important results. I would therefore ask you to please give to me the whole of your attention for

the next few minutes, so that I may the better be enabled to produce the trance stage as nearly perfect as possible."

Constance inclined her head in assent. One thing she could not help noticing was, that there was a marked difference in his manner, now that he was about to proceed to business; and she was conscious there and then of having to deal with a very strong personality, if not an extraordinary one.

"Please just look at me for a minute," he said quietly. That was just what she did not want. Why should he adopt that method? She was averse to again looking into his eyes. So instead of doing as he asked, she looked at the ring on her right hand, which was resting easily on the arm of the chair, and answered:

"It is not now usual, I believe, to induce the sleep by the power of the eyes."

"No," he replied, "but while other methods are more popular, it is the best and safest, if properly applied."

Constance thought his tone a little hard, as though he resented her query. Still, she could not repudiate what he said,so she answered, "Very well," and raising her blue eyes to his, looked steadily into them. At first she wanted to pit her own strength of mind against his, but as she continued to gaze, once again that delightful restful feeling came over her, and she gave a slight sigh of content.

Gradually his eyes seemed to grow larger and yet larger, until she could see nothing but their dark brown depths, and then it seemed that she was in-

stinctively warned that she was searching for something in his eyes—she did not know what—but which, with a feeling of terror, she knew she would find, and must find. What was it that was forcing her to seek this unknown mysterious something behind the visible man? She was not doing it voluntarily. Then came the reverse action, this unknown, undesirable thing was seeking her. She was conscious of the fact, also that she was terribly anxious to escape it. Oh!—she must try to avoid it at any cost, she dare not face it. What could she do? Which way could she fly? Black despair seemed to enter her breast. Would no one help her? she thought piteously; was she abandoned in that desolate dark waste, quite alone with this shadowy horror, helpless?

Ah!—it was there, it had found her, it was clutching her—O God! . . . she shrieked the words aloud to the loneliness around her, and then, with a deafening crash and a roar like mighty rivers suddenly loosing themselves into empty bottomless caverns, the spell broke! . . .

She was floating lazily, dreamily, so restfully, amongst the sweetest scented flowers she had ever known.

. . . . . .

Gently closing her eyelids, Brentwood turned his head and looked at the Vicar, who had been watching with deep interest. One glance was sufficient to tell him that her brother was quite unaware of the look of horror that had come into his sister's eyes just before she lost consciousness. Besides, he could see from the position which

Alletson had taken up—at right angles to the operator and the medium—that it was improbable; but he had not been quite sure where her brother was stationed.

The Vicar nodded his head approvingly and then said in a subdued voice:

"I suppose you will let the sleep settle a little before you proceed to sub-consciously awaken her?"

Brentwood absently inclined his head. He was thinking of that look which appeared in Miss Alletson's eyes, just before she passed into the trance, and was asking himself whether or not he should inform her brother of it, there and then.

He must have stood thus—with the first finger and thumb of his right hand pursing his under lip—for fully four minutes, and might have stood longer, if his attention had not been arrested by Alletson's voice suggesting that probably it would now be safe to arouse the medium.

Drawing a deep breath, he quietly took up his watch and put it in his pocket; then turning to his friend he said:

"Quite so, the sleep should now be sufficiently deep." He then proceeded to arouse the sleeper after applying one or two tests to satisfy himself that the trance stage was in evidence.

He had to call her name three or four times before she showed any signs of mental activity; then, slightly puckering her smooth brow, she heaved a deep sigh and answered in a slow voice:

"Yes, I am here; why do you call me back? I am happy amongst the flowers."

They both watched her face intently, while Brentwood proceeded to question her.

"Are you free?"

"No! You hold me, otherwise I am—let me go."

"That I cannot do," he answered softly but firmly.

"Listen! I want you to go to Worlstoke Vicarage."

The Vicar looked at him inquiringly.

"I am there," she answered listlessly.

Brentwood turned to his friend and whispered quickly:

"On which night did the Rev. Henry Thornton disappear?"

Alletson knitted his brows for a moment, then replied:

"Saturday evening, twenty-first February last, seven P.M."

The Master of Storton thought rapidly, then, turning to the medium, said:

"Go back to seven P.M., Saturday, twenty-first February in this year."

For a time the medium's face looked troubled, as though there were some difficulty, but eventually her countenance cleared and she responded:

"Yes, I am there."

"Is the Rev. Henry Thornton in the Vicarage?"

"No," came the prompt reply.

"Go back to six-thirty P.M."

"Yes."

"Is he there now?"

"Yes, in the study."

"What is he doing?"

"Writing."

" Watch, and say what he does."

A long silence followed, and at last the Vicar made as if to speak, but his friend stopped him with a warning hand. The Vicar was keenly excited; he could not understand how Brentwood had so easily obtained the conditions. But that was unimportant compared with the revelations which appeared imminent.

He looked at the operator's cold, composed features with fresh interest. He had never met a personality like this one, although he had come in contact with many types. This man's intellect was far above the average, and his will power was abnormal.

Evilly disposed, such a character would be a real danger to humanity. What a blessing his tendencies were for good! He looked at Brentwood again, just to satisfy himself that he had made no mistake, when he had, not long ago, decided that the Master of Storton was an upright man; and his scrutiny confirmed that opinion. The features were refined, and the firm mouth and delicate nostrils showed high taste and strong control over the physical propensities.

His attention was recalled by his sister's voice speaking slowly:

" He has finished writing—he rises and goes into the hall—he puts on his hat—he is now speaking to his housekeeper. Now he goes out of the front door—he is standing by the gate hesitating—he turns and walks down the road—he is now approaching a ruined building——"

The Vicar gave a short gasp as he thought of the priory.

"—he looks at it hesitatingly—now he walks to-

wards it—he stops again—and there is a strange look on his face—now he goes on again—he has reached the wall . . . "

The voice stopped abruptly, and a troubled look passed over the sleeper's face. The two men waited eagerly, the one trembling with excitement, the other with set mouth and alert eyes. At last in a pained voice she continued :

" I cannot go any further, something prevents me ; there is something guarding the wall—it is all round it."

Then she added in quick staccato tones :

" I do not want to go. No ! no ! let me return ! ! "

Her voice swelled louder, and the Vicar half rose out of his chair in response to the appeal, but his host quietly and firmly put his hand on his shoulder, and at the same time said in a clear voice :

" Come back to the present. Do not be afraid, no harm can come to you."

Then he began to speak slowly and firmly in a strange tongue. This he continued to do for fully half a minute, and gradually the troubled look disappeared from the medium's countenance and once more she breathed easily and regularly.

The operator studied her face carefully before he again spoke, and then, being apparently satisfied that things were in order, he resumed :

" Now go into the ruins."

" I am there," she responded listlessly.

" Can you see the Rev. Henry Thornton ? "

" No."

" Tell me what you see."

After a pause she replied :

" Crumbling walls ; broken flagstones ; ivy ; old rubbish heaps covered with weeds . . . nothing but ruins."

" Have you been all over the priory ? "

" Yes."

" Are there not any vaults or chambers underground ? "

" Yes "—after hesitation.

" Where ? "

" I am in a large vault now, under the refectory."

" Describe it."

" It is quite empty, except for dust and rubbish."

" Can you find the entrance ? "

" Yes, there are some steps leading up to a trap-door in the floor of the refectory, but it is covered by a large flagstone."

" Is there no other underground chamber ? "

" I think so . . . 'er—I'm in a passage."

" Where ? "

" About underneath the chapel."

" Can you find the entrance ? "

There was a long pause, during which the medium looked much perplexed. At last the words came :

" I have come to a wall, about twenty paces from where I started, but I cannot pass it."

" Is there anything the other side of it ? "

" Yes."

" What do you think it is ? "

" I don't know."

" Why cannot you pass the wall ? "

" Some force prevents me."

" Follow the passage the other way."

"Yes, it is long, very long . . . Oh! Let me get out of this dreadful place, there is something evil and weird about it. I feel the presence of death in some form all around. But that I am guarded by your power, I should be lost."

She spoke in a voice agitated with fear, and lifted her hands appealingly. Brentwood took hold of them in his own, and spoke in a low firm voice:

"Peace, forget, and awake in ten minutes."

He released her hands, and with a long drawn-out sigh her head fell back, and to all appearances she was just peacefully asleep.

When Constance awoke, it was to find the two men looking steadily at her. As soon as she opened her eyes, the Master of Storton immediately arose, and going to a chiffonier poured into a glass out of a decanter a liquid which looked like water, excepting that it effervesced at intervals, as it came into contact with the air.

"Drink this," he said gently. His face was grave, but his eyes smiled kindly, and she was just thinking how nice he was, when that instinctive dislike for him, which she had before experienced, entered her mind. She took the proffered glass hesitatingly, and he noticed it.

"Drink it straight away, Miss Alletson, it will stimulate you without any after ill-effects."

She drank it slowly, and felt a faint tingling sensation, as though the heart's action had been slightly increased. It refreshed her, however, and feeling better, she said:

"Well! have you been successful?"

The Master of Storton avoided her eyes as he replied:

"I think we have learned of something which may lead to success, Miss Alletson."

He then briefly told her all that had happened during the experiment, while she listened eagerly.

"There is one thing certain," exclaimed the Vicar, when Brentwood had finished. "We shall have to closely inspect the ruins of the old priory."

"Yes," replied the Master of Storton, "and the sooner we do it, the better."

They there and then arranged that the Vicar should let Brentwood know by messenger, if he could manage to go in the morning. All being well, they would meet at the priory about 10 A.M.

"Of course you will go back in my car," said their host. "I've given instructions for it to be ready."

They thanked him for his thoughtfulness and rose to depart.

"I must say before you go," remarked Brentwood as they passed into the hall, "that you are an excellent medium, Miss Alletson; much better, in fact, than many professional ones I have met."

To her own vexation, Constance blushed a little at the compliment; and she replied rather hurriedly:

"Really I'm very glad I have proved satisfactory, but perhaps it was more due to the skill of the operator that I proved so."

The Master of Storton actually frowned as he replied:

"You flatter me mistakenly, Miss Alletson. No matter how good an operator may be, without a

first-class medium no experiments would be of much use. It would simply be like a musician trying to get harmony out of an instrument that was out of tune."

Before they got into the brougham, Brentwood did what appeared to be a strange thing. He introduced his visitors to Agar Halfi, his chauffeur. If either of them thought it curious, neither of them, of course, showed it. As to Agar Halfi, he—not at all embarrassed—murmured his pleasure at the honour conferred upon him. He at least did not think it curious.

When they arrived at the Vicarage, the Hindoo jumped down to hold open the door. As they alighted, Constance turned to him with a smile and thanked him for bringing them home.

Agar Halfi's face lighted up, and bowing low, he said in his dignified way:

"I am always pleased to serve the friends of my beloved master."

Which remark set Constance wondering what it was that made her dislike the Master of Storton, when everybody else (except Arthur Shepperton) had such a good opinion of him.

Agar Halfi watched them with his dark eyes, until they disappeared through the doorway. Then he slowly turned round and studied the near front wheel of the car. Eventually he gave voice to an emphatic "umph," and shaking his head doubtfully, mounted the car, muttering in his own language, and drove away.

CHAPTER IX

A LADY'S GLOVE

THAT evening Constance was alone, Philip having gone to visit a parishioner who was sick. It was chilly, and she drew her chair close to the fire. A book lay on her knee, but she was not reading, her mind being engrossed with the events of the afternoon.

On the way home from the Manor, Philip had related to her all that had happened, and it was evident from his remarks that he had no knowledge of what transpired just before she lost consciousness. She had almost there and then told him, but checked the impulse, thinking it better perhaps to wait a little.

It was satisfying to know that some progress had been made, and that she had been instrumental in it; but the curious incident which had twice occurred rather damped her spirits. The effect of it—besides confirming her instinctive dislike for the Master of Storton—was to arouse a suspicion in her mind that he was a dangerous man!

She would very much like to know what had caused that dreadful feeling of horror—she shuddered as she remembered it—but for that, the progress that had been made would have given her every cause for satisfaction.

What particularly troubled her was, that while

naturally she did not want to suffer another such experience, she was aware of a distinct desire within her to again look into his eyes! It was not pleasant to be conscious of that fact under the circumstances; it made her feel just a little bit helpless; but having promised to assist all she could, she did not want to go back on her word without sufficient cause, yet just then she decidedly felt that she would rather not go to the Manor again.

Had she been a man, she would probably have come to the conclusion that it was a mere coincidence, and have dismissed the matter from her mind, on the ground that there was not any reasonable basis upon which to assume anything, but being a woman, she did not think that way. She instinctively disliked the man, and that was sufficient for her to arrive at the conclusion that there was something wrong with him.

Some men would laugh at such a decision, putting it down to woman's illogical way of reasoning; but it is as well to remember that the feminine mind intuitively arrives at correct solutions of things far more quickly than the masculine mind does by the slow and not always sound process of reasoning.

In the fading light Constance idly watched the shadows from the fire silently playing on the walls and ceiling. Outside all seemed peaceful and at rest, in ironic contrast to her mind. Something she would have to decide upon soon; such a state of indecision she well knew could not last for long. But it was not an easy task.

Her meditations were interrupted by a ring of

the front-door bell, and shortly afterwards the maid announced that Mr. Shepperton had called to see Mr. Alletson.

"Of course, Martha, you told him the master was out?"

"Yes, miss," she replied. "So he said he would be glad if he could see you for a few minutes."

Constance frowned; she did not particularly want to see anyone just then; but perhaps he had called to see her brother about some Church work, and in that case she felt it her duty to see him. So rising, she lighted the gas and told Martha to show Mr. Shepperton in.

As soon as he entered the room, Constance noticed that he was unnerved. His eyes shone brightly and his face was paler than usual, though the colour kept coming and going in his cheeks.

She looked at him a little startled, not quite knowing what to do; at last he exclaimed:

"I've found a clue!" and then dropped into a chair, breathing irregularly.

She looked at him in mute surprise for a moment, then it suddenly occurred to her that he looked ill, and she said:

"Can I get you anything, Mr. Shepperton?"

He nodded, then answered gratefully:

"Thanks, I should like a glass of water."

When she left the room, he rose and commenced to walk quickly backwards and forwards. He gazed restlessly around him and said half aloud: "By God! if it is he, I'll"—but he did not finish the sentence, for at that moment Constance re-entered the room.

He drank some of the water eagerly, and put down the glass with a sigh of relief.

She looked at him sympathetically. Her disposition was a kind one, and she was very sorry for him in his trouble. It is hard to lose one who is dear to you, and she had extended her sympathy to Mr. Shepperton beyond the ordinary, and she felt that he had been grateful to her.

When he had recovered himself somewhat, Arthur Shepperton put his hand inside his coat, and without a word, drew forth a kid glove, which he carefully placed on the table. For a short time he looked at it despairingly, then said :

" Do you know to whom that belongs ? "

Constance looked at him questioningly.

" Look inside it," he continued.

Constance silently picked it up and read on the lining the initials " E. H."

She trembled a little, in spite of her determination to keep cool.

" And where did you find it ? " she half whispered.

He expected her question, for he answered immediately :

" In the priory ruins ! "

Constance's heart jumped; she at once thought of Philip's adventure.

Shepperton noticed her start, and looked at her curiously.

During the pause the door opened and Philip entered. Neither heard him, they were so absorbed, each in their own thoughts.

The Vicar looked at them wonderingly, Shep-

perton leaning forward in his chair, staring at Constance, while she stood gazing at him, with one hand on the table, supporting her body, the other holding up the glove.

"What is the matter?" he said quietly.

They both turned suddenly, and Constance exclaimed:

"Oh! I'm so glad you have come. Mr. Shepperton has found Miss Hobson's glove in the priory."

The Vicar uttered an exclamation, and taking the glove from his sister looked at it intently; then turning to Shepperton, he asked:

"Of course, there can be no doubt about it?"

The other man laughed mirthlessly, and answered:

"Not a shadow of a doubt, I could swear to it."

"Where exactly was it?" asked Alletson.

"I went for a walk this afternoon, and coming back I wandered into the ruins. I don't know them very well, so I thought I would have a look round. Now you know the part which used to be the chapel?"

"—m—yes," answered the Vicar.

"Well, up at the top end, where the altar would have been, the wall is crumbling away in parts, and I had just stepped across one of these places, when my foot dislodged one of the loose stones. This fell on the ground outside the wall and knocked away another stone, which had been lying there goodness knows how long. Naturally I looked to see what had happened, and there, where the stone had been lying, I found the glove."

Alletson drummed his fingers on the table, while he gazed into the fire. Then he said :

" What do you intend to do ? "

" Well, I shall, of course inform the police," he replied, then added, " I came here first though, thinking you would like to know at once."

" I'm glad you did," answered the Vicar.

Shepperton looked at him wonderingly.

" Because," he continued, " I don't think I should go to the police."

" Not go to the police ! " he echoed.

" At any rate, for the present," said Alletson. " Let me explain. There is, I am sure, more in this case than at first appears. Certain things which have happened led me to consult Mr. Brentwood. He is now investigating the matter, and I have great hopes that he will be able to solve the mystery."

" Mr. Brentwood," ejaculated Shepperton, with a half-sneer. " What's he got to do with it ? "

A pained look came into the Vicar's face ; the man's tone was so bitter. Constance noticed that her brother was hurt, and turning to Shepperton, she said coldly :

" Mr. Brentwood has been good enough to promise to give his time to a subject which hardly concerns him, and I think, Mr. Shepperton, we really ought to be grateful for his help."

Her tone hurt him—he was surprised to find—more than he thought it could have done, and he remembered it afterwards ; but at the time he was annoyed.

"I would rather he had nothing to do with it," he said stubbornly.

They both looked at him in surprise, then the Vicar said sternly:

"Surely, Mr. Shepperton, that is unreasonable. If Mr. Brentwood has offered his help when asked to give it, why should you want to refuse?"

The other man looked sullenly at him before he answered, then said irritably:

"To tell the truth, I don't like the gentleman, and I don't want any help or favours at his hands."

A cloud began to gather on the Vicar's face, but almost immediately his expression changed and he said kindly:

"Mr. Shepperton, you are upset, or I'm sure you would not have spoken thus. Let me assure you that in my opinion, if Mr. Brentwood cannot assist us in this extraordinary case, the police certainly cannot."

Shepperton was surprised into silence, and for a time did not speak. Then he asked in a more subdued manner:

"Do you really think that? How can he help in any particular way? Is he an amateur detective? Really I don't understand."

Alletson smiled slightly.

"No," he replied, "but"—he hesitated and looked at Constance, then said to her:

"Perhaps we had better tell Mr. Shepperton everything?"

Constance nodded — there seemed no other way. So quietly and carefully he related all that had happened, while the other man listened

with open eyes and occasional interruptions of surprise.

"Now, Mr. Shepperton, I don't think you will think it advisable to go to the police just yet."

Shepperton rose and held out his hand.

"Please forgive me if I spoke hastily just now, Mr. Alletson," he said; "I'm grateful for what you have done, and I'm quite willing to let matters take their course for the present. You may depend upon me, of course, to assist in any way possible."

The Vicar was pleasantly surprised at his frankness and grasped his hand heartily. But Constance was not so sure that he was sincere, the change was so sudden. However, she did not say anything.

"Perhaps we had better go and make a careful search as soon as possible?" said Shepperton.

"Yes," replied the Vicar, "it would be just as well. I could manage to-morrow morning, if not too early. How would ten o'clock suit you?"

"Oh, any time will suit me," replied Shepperton. Then, turning to Constance, he added: "I hope you will be coming too, Miss Alletson?"

She hesitated a moment, then replied slowly:

"Yes, I think I will come, if I shall not be in the way."

"No question about that," he answered emphatically.

"Very well," said Alletson; "I will send a note round to the Manor, asking Mr. Brentwood to meet us there. I know he will come."

"That will be excellent," replied Shepperton brightly. "And now I think I had better be going. Good night!"

As he hurried along the road, Arthur Shepperton's mind was busy sorting things out. Being a very practical young man, he was half inclined to laugh at the Vicar's statements. He did not believe in that sort of thing, and if certain people liked to go wandering after will-o'-the-wisps, that was not his business. On the other hand, he would have a good opportunity to watch Brentwood. A man who had in his possession photographs like the one he had found in the priory could not be up to much good. He still resented his being introduced into the matter, he so disliked the man, and the fact of finding Elsie's glove in the priory ruins increased his desire to watch Brentwood. He could not exactly say why, but it seemed somehow to connect him with the case.

He wondered why Alletson had not confided in him in the first place; it hurt his pride, and he took it as a snub. Surely he should have been the first one to have known. However, he would dismiss the matter for the present, and see what the morning brought forth.

Just before he arrived at his apartments, he suddenly remembered that Constance Alletson's retort had hurt him, more than he expected, and it then occurred to him that he liked her. Yes, he was pretty sure about that. He recollected that she had been particularly nice to him since Elsie's disappearance. He wondered, in a vague sort of way, whether she liked him, and was still musing on the point when he reached home.

CHAPTER X

"HECTOR" MANIFESTS ANTIPATHY

MEANWHILE the Master of Storton, after the departure of his visitors in the afternoon, went up into his study, and stood with his hands in his coat pockets, looking out of the west window for quite a long time.

To see him standing there, one would have been inclined to think that he was idly viewing the landscape stretched out before him; but as a fact he was thinking about the identical thing which occupied Constance's mind later on in the evening, though from a very different standpoint.

His disposition toward the opposite sex was indifferent, if not cold; but, all the same, it was not particularly pleasant to become suddenly aware that something about him should cause a look of horror—and no doubt the feeling with the look—to come over one of them, the first time he had practically had anything to do with her. He could not sum it up.

He knew that animals were susceptible to the power of his eyes—or rather the hypnotic force behind them—but that could not explain the phenomenon. No animal or human being he had used the power upon had, he was quite sure, shown horror, fear, disgust; all of which symptoms Miss Alletson plainly exhibited before she passed into the sleep.

It might possibly have been nervousness on her

part, through the strangeness of the circumstances —he understood that she had never experimented excepting with her brother—but, against that, he had not noticed any abnormal state, or he would not have proceeded with the experiment; indeed she seemed to be quite cool and collected; and, as far as he could judge, she was of strong character, above the average.

No, it was not that, but then, the thing was a— he stopped abruptly as he thought of the word "mystery," and bit his lip in perplexity; it had such a resemblance to superstition, and all his life, while he had been instinctively drawn toward such things—so-called mysteries or superstitions—he had really only concerned himself with such matters to analyse and expose them.

And yet, what other word could he use for that which is not understood? Another thing, why should he let it bother him? He could let the incident drop, and it would be done with. Yes, that might be all right for some people, but to him it was not possible; his habit of research would not let him do it.

Again, there was only one so-called mystery he had tackled, of which he had not been able to get to the bottom, so surely he should be able to overcome this one?

He felt that he would very much like to know Miss Alletson's version of it, but he hardly felt justified—at present—in approaching her. Still, there was another way to get at the thing; he would experiment on someone else, and see if the same phenomenon exhibited itself.

Though a man of deep thought, he was practical and of quick action, so he straight away put on his hat and walked across to Agar Halfi's lodge.

As he approached the door, he was greeted with a growl of pleasure from his huge bull-mastiff, which came leaping up at him, and nearly knocked him down in its delight.

"Down, Hector! Down!" he exclaimed, as he patted the dog's head, "Where is Agar Halfi?"

The animal ran to the door, sniffed at it, and came back, wagging his tail, as much as to say that the door was shut.

"Not in?" queried Brentwood; "well, I'll wait. Come along!"

He walked into the living room, and sat down on the table, swinging his legs. Agar Halfi, he knew, could not be long, as it was only five minutes' run to the Vicarage.

He looked casually round the room, and started to whistle, when a thought flashed across his mind which caused him to stop abruptly.

"Why not try the experiment on the dog?"

Calling the animal to him, he took its great head between his hands, and looked steadily into its eyes. Hector wriggled, and made as if to get away, but his master silenced him with his voice, and the dog obediently returned his look with its big honest eyes.

For fully half a minute he concentrated the power of his mind on the animal, and then, with the second contraction of the pupils, Brentwood began to be satisfied that the experiment—as he expected it would do—had passed off satisfactorily. All at

once the dog, who had almost passed into the sleep, whimpered, and, breaking away from his grasp, backed away from his master whining with terror.

The animal's action was so sudden and so strange, that the man momentarily let go the mental hold he had of it. In that instant the dog's eyes flamed, and, with a deep, savage bay, he made as if to spring. Recovering himself immediately, Brentwood shouted in sharp tones :

"Lie down!"

His master's voice of command had the desired effect. The dog—habitually used to obeying it—lay down, though apparently ill at ease, giving vent to occasional suppressed growls.

The Master of Storton took a long breath, and, pulling out his pocket-handkerchief, wiped small drops of perspiration from his forehead. He was keenly awake to the fact that he had had a narrow escape of his life. No man unarmed could stand against the attack of a dog like Hector.

However, it was not the first time he had faced death and probably it would not be the last. But the fact of the dog turning on him set him "furiously to think." It looked as if the animal had been affected in the same way as Miss Alletson. If that were so, he wondered what sort of a nerve Miss Alletson had, because it would have to be something extraordinary to make Hector attack his master.

His head sank down on his chest as he tried to unravel it. The animal without doubt showed fear and horror, whilst under the spell of his eyes. He

also noticed that the thing happened just about the time when the sleep was in evidence.

He was still musing over it when Agar Halfi entered the room. On seeing Brentwood sitting there, the Hindoo waited for him to speak. This for a time he did not do, but instead looked absently at him, as though debating in his mind whether or not he would say anything at all. At last he broke the silence.

"Agar Halfi, I've a problem I want to discuss with you."

Without a word the man crossed the room, and, squatting on the hearthrug—Eastern fashion—began to stare at the fire.

Brentwood watched him and smiled. It was one of the Hindoo's peculiarities that he never spoke unless it was absolutely necessary, and what he had done was simply his way of stating that he was ready to listen, and all attention.

"I don't think there is much known about hypnotism with which I am not acquainted?"

The other man nodded.

"On the other hand," continued the speaker, "as far as it is possible I know that you are a master of the science, as you are of most things occult, and I am going to lay before you a phenomenon which I have to-day discovered. But before I do so, I want you to test my hypnotic influence."

"Why waste time, Sahib? Your powers in that direction need no testing."

"I have good reason for it, Agar Halfi. It will make all the difference to what I have to lay before you."

"Then we will test it," replied the man laconically.

"What I want you to note is, what you experience while I am using the power, before you lose consciousness."

Agar Halfi made no reply, but getting up from the floor, sat in a chair and got ready for the experiment.

To Brentwood's surprise, everything went off without the slightest hitch. No disturbing element at all manifested itself. The Master of Storton whistled softly under his breath; this complicated matters.

He awoke the Hindoo almost immediately, who at once resumed his seat on the hearthrug and gazed calmly into the fire.

"So you experienced nothing out of the common?"

"Nothing, Sahib," was the reply.

The Master of Storton looked vacantly at the ceiling, and then, without "beating about the bush," related what had occurred during the afternoon's experiment, and what happened later on with the dog.

"Now, my friend, what do you think of it?"

The Hindoo did not reply, but instead rose from the floor, and going over to the dog, swiftly put him into the sleep, without the slightest trouble. Brentwood watched while he did it, with interested eyes; not the slightest action escaped him, and he noticed that there was not any sign of trouble at all with the animal.

When he had finished, Agar Halfi resumed his seat and studied the fire with half-closed eyes. At last he remarked:

"When did the Sahib last use the power?"

"Really, I forget, but I think it was well over six months ago."

"I once saw a man who was possessed with a devil shrink with the fear of death when I cast out the evil one."

"What do you think caused the fear?"

"Ah, Sahib, who knows? Possibly the unfortunate one, when on the borderland above the world, caught sight of his tormentor before he flew away. Possibly the poor man saw its reflection in my eyes? But still, who knows?"

Brentwood laughed lightly as he replied:

"I don't think the lady has a devil, even if the dog has. But it is possible that they both saw a devil in me."

"Then why did not Agar Halfi see it?" was the terse reply.

"Exactly, my friend, that is the curious point," answered the Master of Storton.

"Besides," continued the Hindoo, "if you had a devil, you would show signs of him, and there are no such signs to my knowledge."

"It is perplexing," replied the other; "but still, I don't doubt that we shall unravel it. There is nothing which we have yet tackled which we have not conquered, is there?" Brentwood paused, then continued, "excepting"—he again paused, and looked at the Hindoo, who, without turning his head, said:

"Excepting that one great mystery, Sahib, which nearly cost you your life."

The Master of Storton looked thoughtful, then said in a low voice:

"Yes, I had almost forgotten. Let me see, how long was I in that trance?"

"Six weeks and two days, Sahib; and at times I did not know whether you were alive or dead. You never moved nor spoke a word, and although I did my best, I could not rouse you. You were in the grip of some force stronger than any Agar Halfi knows."

"And but for your charmed ring, my friend, I should not be here now!"

The Hindoo slightly shrugged his shoulders as he answered:

"Who knows?"

"Yes," continued the Master of Storton, "if I had been wise I should have taken your advice and forgotten that such a place existed; then I should not have got this," and pulling down his collar he pointed to a jagged white scar about three inches long.

"And yet there was no wound, Sahib!"

"Still, Agar Halfi, I will be quits with that ghost yet! For that reason I am glad you photographed for me those footprints." He paused, and whistled softly, then went on:

"My word, each one fully three times as big as a man's hand! And, as we have proved since, no known bird has got a foot like that. But the strangest part of all is, that there were only two of them, and those close together, barely three yards from where I was lying."

"That was so, Sahib, and, although I searched closely, I discovered no others."

Brentwood thought silently for a time, then remarked:

"It is very extraordinary, but look here, Agar Halfi, if it had not been material, how could it have left footprints? Answer me that."

"And if it was material, Sahib, how could it have *not* left its tracks?"

They both looked at each other and laughed. Then Brentwood closed his eyes and said quietly:

"Presumably, being of the bird type, it could have flown."

"True, Sahib, but Agar Halfi did not see it fly."

"It was dark, my friend."

"True again, but Agar Halfi could see the Sahib plainly enough, and he could also see the great dim shape of the hobgoblin, it being hardly three strides away from where you were lying."

"My face is white, besides I was lying close to the fire, and could easily be seen by you. But the night was dark, you said, there being no moon, and if the thing was sombre in colour you could not have seen it any more than to think it was a shadow."

"Also true, Sahib; but again, if it were material, and did not walk away (and it must have left its tracks if it had done that), it must have flown away as you said. But Agar Halfi did not hear the rustle of its wings!"

Brentwood smiled at the Oriental's arguments, the subtlety of which proved to him that there was reason in the Hindoo's make-up, and what was more, common sense.

"Quite so, Agar Halfi; but then you were horror-stricken, and all your attention was apparently

turned to me, and in that case you may not have heard it fly away."

"If the Sahib judges the size of the evil one from his feet, does he think it possible that Agar Halfi would not hear him fly away under any circumstances? I have ears, and should have had to be unconscious not to have heard him."

"Even then," continued the Master of Storton, "you may have been oblivious to all external things except the one. Remember the state you were in; all sorts of things may happen under such conditions."

The Hindoo shook his head as he replied:

"You can find an answer to all things, but Agar Halfi was not deceived."

"Well, we will leave it at that," continued the Master of Storton; "and now, I want to tell you that probably I shall be visiting the priory ruins to-morrow with the Vicar and his sister, and I want you to come also. It is possible that there may be work to do there."

CHAPTER XI

THE DISCOVERY

In the morning Arthur Shepperton called for the Vicar and his sister, and they went together to the priory. Brentwood had not arrived when they got there, so they sat down to wait, on the same seat that Shepperton had utilised a few days ago.

Alletson, under his outward reserve, was excited, being keenly interested in the exploration, in view of what he had himself experienced at the priory. Shepperton seemed sullen and taciturn, and Constance appeared indifferent.

For a time none of them spoke, the two men being apparently absorbed each in his own thoughts, whilst Constance was occupied in studying the outside of the ruin.

Occasionally, each would look in the direction from which Brentwood should come. At last the Vicar pulled out his watch and broke the silence by saying:

"It is barely ten yet; I don't think there will be any doubt about his coming."

Shepperton yawned in a bored sort of fashion, and answered, in a way which seemed to imply that it didn't matter whether the Master of Storton turned up or not, "I hope not," and then lapsed into silence again.

"I believe these ruins are very old," said Alletson, addressing himself to Shepperton.

"Yes," replied the latter. "They date back to the fourteenth century." He paused, then added: "There are some queer stories connected with their history, and, as is usual with such places, it is of course haunted."

The scorn in his voice drew Constance's attention; it irritated her a little, so she said:

"Don't you think it probable that some of these old places really are haunted?"

"Certainly not, Miss Alletson," he replied emphatically. "It is merely superstitious belief, which has been, and I believe is now, used in some countries by the Romish priests to frighten the ignorant into submission."

"That may be true," retorted Constance, "but it does not prove that houses are not haunted, and there are some very intelligent people who agree that they are!"

Shepperton smiled in a confident way, and answered:

"You may take it from me, Miss Alletson, that modern science has exploded all such theories."

His reply roused Constance. Her whole individuality resented his take-it-for-granted attitude that women do not and cannot understand these things, and must accept, like a questioning child, what a man says as right.

"Do you mean to imply, Mr. Shepperton, that you know absolutely that such is the case, because, if so, I should like to be enlightened. I am rather under the impression that modern science has not

yet arrived at a stage when it can satisfactorily deal with such problems."

He was a little bit nonplussed, not expecting such an answer from a woman, and, while he sought for a suitable reply, he glanced uneasily at her brother, who was looking at the floor, listening in grim silence.

At last he said :

" Well, so far as I know, every case that has been investigated has been traced to spiritualistic trickery, or something of that kind. Besides, no one has yet been able to prove to anyone else that he or she has seen a ghost, which I think is fair proof that so-called apparitions are mental disturbances, traceable to physical disorders."

" And if you could not prove that the quack's patent medicine was *not* a cure-all, would you advance that as a proof that it was ? "

Shepperton looked at her a little mystified. Her counter-question rather puzzled him, so he answered: " I fail to see what bearing your remark has upon what I said."

" Well, to put it in another way, Mr. Shepperton, because you cannot prove one thing, *that* does not prove another, and the fact that no one has proved to anyone else that he or she has seen a ghost, does not prove that there are not any ghosts, any more than the failure to prove that a patent medicine is not a cure-all proves that it is one ! "

" Still," he answered doggedly, " the fact remains that people who are suffering from mental and physical disorders do see visions——"

" Which again," interposed Constance, " does not prove that healthy people do not see them, and if

you will look up the records of the Society for Psychical Research, you will find distinct proofs of the latter."

There was a brief silence, during which Shepperton slowly formed a different opinion of the Vicar's sister. He had an uncomfortable feeling that Miss Alletson was better grounded than he in that particular subject at any rate.

Discretion warned him to let the matter drop there; but that feeling of being beaten egged him on. It was not likely that she could have had any personal experience of such things, so he returned to the attack.

"I've had practical experience of these matters, Miss Alletson. I attended for six months what was called a 'Public Circle,' which used to be held in Westsea once a fortnight. I went purposely to find out for myself whether there was anything at all in what so-called spiritualists claimed."

Constance looked interested.

"Well?" she said.

"Well," he repeated, "at the end of that time I came away satisfied that the people who went there were merely their own dupes. Not one shred nor atom of rational evidence did I find. Ghosts and messages from ghosts innumerable were supposed to have appeared and been received, but as for proof of either—well, it was not forthcoming. The people simply worked themselves up into an emotional state and just believed."

"And was that the end of your investigation, Mr. Shepperton?"

"Well," he replied, "do you think it was neces-

sary for me to go any further; surely the thing condemned itself?"

"You seem to have been unfortunate in your endeavours," she answered.

"Unfortunate!" he exclaimed. "How?"

"When investigating psychic phenomena, public circles are not conducive to good results, Mr. Shepperton. The conditions created are very mixed and unharmonious. Besides, such investigation requires preparation. It is necessary for all the investigators to be in mental harmony; a specially prepared room must be used; proper clothing worn that is kept for the purpose; abstention from stimulants and meats is desirable; and above all, perfect bodily cleanliness. Under such conditions, investigators may get a lot more than they expect, after a fair trial."

Shepperton listened with the growing conviction that the Vicar's sister knew something about the matter under discussion, but somehow he could not bring himself to accept defeat, so he remarked:

"Do you believe in such things?"

"I can't say that I actually believe, but evidence points to there being something in it."

"What do you think about it?" he said, turning to the Vicar.

The latter, who had been greatly amused at the little battle, roused himself.

"Well, I am bound to say that there are many things connected with the soul and the spirit which are not understood, and as far as I know, modern research on psychological lines tends to show that we are on the verge of strange discoveries. I have

no settled views either way. But perhaps Mr. Brentwood could tell you something if you are anxious to get information; he has made a life-long study of such problems."

"Oh!" exclaimed Shepperton. He paused, then went on: "So I suppose it is only natural to expect that he thinks these strange disappearances are due to some occult agency?"

"I don't think so," replied the Vicar coldly. "Anyhow, it was I who first put it to him that this might be the case."

"Oh!" exclaimed Shepperton again.

At this juncture their attention was arrested by the appearance of a great dog, which had evidently arrived unnoticed while they were talking. Constance uttered an exclamation, and both men visibly started. As for the dog, he seemed quite unconcerned. After a cursory glance, he approached the seat and sniffed at them; then he deliberately went back to Constance, placed his great head on her lap, looked up into her face and slowly wagged his tail. Overcoming her first sense of fear, she patted his head and his tail wagged faster.

"I see he wants to make friends with you, Miss Alletson!"

They all turned from studying the dog, to find Brentwood standing about a dozen paces away.

"Really," said Constance, with a little laugh, "I can hardly say whether or not I appreciate his overtures; I'm not sure I'm not afraid of him."

"No one with whom Hector makes friends need be afraid of him," was the quiet answer.

"I shouldn't care to have a row with him," remarked Shepperton satirically.

"No," replied the Master of Storton. "They are very formidable enemies, but, on the other hand, excellent friends, Mr.—er."

"I'm sorry," interposed the Vicar. "Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Brentwood, Mr. Shepperton."

The Master of Storton bowed gravely, while Shepperton curtly inclined his head.

"I'm sorry to be a little late," continued Brentwood. "Something went wrong with my motor-car, and I had to walk. However, I don't think there is much the matter, and in all probability it will be here shortly and we can drive back together."

"Have you decided upon any mode of procedure?"

The Vicar shook his head smilingly, as he replied:

"I'm afraid not; in fact I rather think we had all left it to you as a matter of course."

"Perhaps," ventured Brentwood, "Mr. Shepperton has some suggestion?"

"Oh no," was the indifferent reply. "Personally I'm not skilled in such matters, and shall be glad if you will direct our operations."

"Very well. First of all, we will try to get the trail of Miss Hobson from the glove by the aid of Hector."

They entered the ruins by the door in the wall,

Brentwood and Shepperton leading the way, followed by the other two a short distance behind.

"By the aid of the dog, I think we can prove whether Miss Hobson"—he paused, and added in a lower voice—"or her body, is in these ruins!"

"You may find her body," exclaimed Shepperton bitterly, "but it is surely impossible that she could be alive after all this time?"

"It is not impossible," responded Brentwood slowly.

"Well then, improbable," returned Shepperton, with slight irritation.

Brentwood's face hardened a little as he replied:

"I have no wish to be pedantic, but there is a distinct difference between impossible and improbable, as you must know, and in a matter of this kind we cannot be too careful."

"Very good," replied Shepperton. "But I may as well tell you frankly that I have little, if any, faith in your theory; on the other hand I wish to be fair, and am willing to see it through."

The Master of Storton made no reply to the last remark. He had had too much experience to be drawn into a desultory argument, unless it was forced upon him. But the unconscious egotism displayed by his companion in practically stating that he was willing to let the theory have a fair chance, amused him not a little.

But Shepperton was in an antagonistic mood, and continued:

"I'm not afraid to face a ghost when I meet one, a thing which I have not yet done, and as far as I can judge, never shall."

"I'm glad that you will not be afraid," returned the other.

Shepperton flushed. "Your words imply that I probably shall meet one?"

Brentwood did not answer. He very nearly said, "I hope so," but thought better of it. Instead, his mind drifted to a similar remark he once made to Agar Halfi, some years ago, the evening before he nearly lost his life in Afghanistan.

His reflections in that direction were interrupted by his becoming aware that Shepperton was eyeing him curiously, awaiting a reply. "If you follow this case through, as you say you will, it is more than probable that you will modify your views on such matters."

"Well, I'm open to conviction," was the reply, in a dogmatic tone.

"So was I once!"

Shepperton stared hard at him, the remark was so easily and coolly made that he hardly knew how to take it. At last he said:

"Then you have seen a ghost?"

Brentwood returned his look calmly, and a very faint smile appeared in his eyes as he answered:

"Not in my normal state."

Shepperton gave a gesture of contempt, as much as to say, "I thought he would wriggle," then replied:

"Plenty of people have seen them like that."

"You mean phantoms of the mind, don't you?"

"Certainly; isn't that what you mean?"

"No!"

Shepperton waited for him to continue, but was

disappointed. It is probable that the Master of Storton would have explained there and then and set at rest the other man's doubts, had not an entirely new circumstance intervened and stopped an explanation which would have saved much pain and trouble for some people, and very nearly a tragedy for others. Such a happening is what we call "The Hand of Fate," which is simply a name for things which we do not understand, and therefore, over which we have no control, unless we hit upon the solution by blind luck, and then some people call it "Providence." Others less susceptible say nothing, but wonder.

Just when he would have replied, Brentwood had a distinct feeling that Constance Alletson was not only looking at him, but thinking about him, and as he became cognisant of the thought a strange trembling passed through his body. He felt that she was trying to analyse something in him, and was mistrustful about it.

This at once recalled to his mind what had happened during the experiment at the Manor a few days ago, and he did not feel at ease. A sudden impulse—which he promptly suppressed—urged him to ask her about it there and then. No, it would be better to wait. Perhaps, after all, it was but the strangeness of circumstances which had caused it, and if that were so, he would be sorry to have spoken. But what about the dog?

The sound of quickened footsteps caused both Shepperton and him to turn. Just behind were the Vicar and his sister, and with them Agar Halfi.

"We heard your car coming along just as we

were about to enter through the door in the wall, so waited," explained Constance.

To Shepperton's surprise, Brentwood introduced him to Agar Halfi, and then explained to the Hindoo what they proposed to do. Whereupon the latter silently leashed Hector, and the Master of Storton gave the dog the scent from the glove, while they all watched in silence. After momentary hesitation, Hector started off in a northerly direction along the outside of the ruined wall. He travelled the whole length of it, then rounding the angle to the east, continued at a brisk pace until he reached that part of the wall which used to form the back of the altar. Here he stopped, and whined, then making straight for an opening a little lower down, got into the chancel, and walked restlessly all round, at last coming to a stop at the altar. Here he pawed the ground, whining fretfully. They all looked at each other, perplexed.

"Underground?" queried Shepperton, in a low voice.

Brentwood nodded, and motioning to the Hindoo to hold back the dog, carefully inspected the stone flags. But not a sign of anything having been disturbed could be detected. So far as could be seen, the floor was as it had lain for centuries.

It was Alletson who solved the difficulty. While the others had been intently examining the flags, he had been looking at those parts of the wall which still remained intact, and had alighted on a secret door, which by accident he had pushed open. It was part of the wall, fitting exactly into the pattern of the stone, and was on the inner side of

one of the outside buttresses. When opened, it revealed stone steps leading down from the back of the buttress, underneath the chancel.

Lighting one of the motor lamps which he had brought with him, Agar Halfi descended after the dog, and the rest of the party followed.

They discovered themselves in a chamber or vault, which apparently ran under the full extent of the chancel.

Straining at his leash, Hector made straight for the west side of the vault and started scratching at the wall, sniffing and growling alternately. Here they came to a dead stop, for seek as they would, no sign of any way through the wall could they find.

Baffled, they turned their attention to the vault itself, and almost immediately a discovery was made. Before they had proceeded many yards, the Hindoo stumbled, and uttered something which sounded like a curse, at the same time the dog bayed warningly, and Constance clung tighter to her brother's arm.

Bringing the lamp to bear on the spot, they found the obstacle over which the Hindoo had stumbled, and Shepperton gave an exclamation of consternation as he stooped to look.

No, it was not Elsie Hobson. Lying with arms outstretched, a look of intense horror on his face, lay Henry Thornton !

The Master of Storton bent silently down to examine the body, and when he rose, they all noticed that his face was very stern, and his mouth shut in a straight line.

He looked across the vault into the darkness, and before his mind rose a vision of a wild spot in Afghanistan, for across the throat of the unfortunate clergyman was a jagged wound about two and a half inches long, and on either side of the body was the imprint of a huge bird-shaped foot!

CHAPTER XII

A WARNING

As was to be expected, the Coroner's Jury returned a verdict of "Murder against some person or persons unknown."

From the medical evidence it transpired that death was caused by heart failure, due to shock, though it was stated that the wound in the throat would have been sufficient to kill. As to what caused the wound, there was no clear indication, the evidence merely stating, "some blunt instrument of a peculiar nature."

The discovery was, of course, the central topic of the neighbourhood for days, and did not subside until some time after the remains of the Rev. Henry Thornton had been decently interred in the churchyard.

The police made a thorough search of the priory ruins, and hopes ran high that some clue to Elsie Hobson's disappearance would be found; but in spite of all their efforts, nothing of any consequence occurred, and gradually the general excitement waned.

During this period Shepperton, although he gave the police all the help he could, deliberately withheld from them the one item of information which, had he chosen to give it, might have at once brought matters to an issue. The photograph which he had

picked up was probably the key to the mystery; but he had determined that until he had sufficient evidence to condemn the Master of Storton he would work alone. There was no doubt in his mind that Brentwood knew all about it, and he had every reason to believe that the crimes had been perpetrated by him. If the photograph had not been sufficient to indicate that he knew something, the start which he gave (Shepperton remembered particularly that he uttered no exclamation) when he examined the body, and saw the wound in the throat, was sufficient to show that the Master of Storton was deeply involved in the case, if not actually guilty. Further, the whole circumstances pointed to the conclusion that the wound had some sort of a connection with the footprints.

He pondered over it almost daily, and the more he thought about it, the more the idea gained strength that Brentwood was the culprit. In that case, if he were going to bring the crime home to his door, he would have to act very carefully. It would not be easy to circumvent the subtlety of a man who, evidently guilty, had the cleverness to be one of the first to come forward to help clear the matter up. Shepperton saw that such a course served a double purpose. It not only enabled the criminal to know what the genuine investigators were doing, it gave him every opportunity to mislead them; and, of course, it was hardly likely that anyone would suspect the man, when working in co-operation with him.

One consideration which caused him to adopt this course was, that he determined to leave nothing

undone likely to bring the criminal to justice—he had no doubt that Elsie was dead.

While deliberating, it occurred to him that perhaps it would be as well to put the Vicar and his sister on their guard against Brentwood. It would not be just on his part to let them get too far involved with the Master of Storton, when it lay in his power to warn them. But they would have to faithfully promise to keep his secret of the photograph. Be it to his credit, that he should thus think of others during his own hours of bitterness.

After further thinking it over, he decided that the only thing to do would be to take the Vicar and his sister entirely into his confidence. If he must tell them anything at all, he might as well tell them everything. No sooner had he made up his mind than he decided to act upon it. Accordingly he went straight to the Vicarage that afternoon on leaving his office.

Alletson welcomed him in his kind way, and Constance invited him to join them at tea, which was ready on the table. During the meal they conversed on ordinary topics, and it was not until Martha had cleared the table and quietly closed the door after her that Shepperton mentioned he had something of grave importance to impart to them.

The Vicar's face grew stern, while Constance poked the fire uneasily, and for a short time there was silence. Seeing that he hesitated, Alletson said kindly :

" Well, Mr. Shepperton, what is the trouble ? "

The remark seemed to enable Shepperton to pull

himself together, and leaning his elbows on the table, he answered deliberately :

" To tell you the simple truth, I've come to warn you against the Master of Storton ! "

Constance stared at him curiously, and the Vicar uttered a surprised " Oh ! "

" I'm sorry to startle you, Mr. Alletson," he continued, " but I'm so sure of my ground. If I had had any doubts, I should not have come. All I ask is that you will both respect my confidence ; further than that, I do not want to bind you in any way. The missing links in the chain I will seek out myself."

" Surely, surely it is not possible that Mr. Brentwood can be the perpetrator of such abominable crimes ? " exclaimed the Vicar in a pained voice.

Why, he did not know, but turning suddenly to Constance, Shepperton asked :

" What is your opinion, Miss Alletson ? "

To the surprise of both men, Constance did not reply. She simply shook her head and turned her gaze to the fire.

During the interval of silence that ensued, her brother looked at her in pure astonishment. He could not understand her not agreeing with what he himself thought ; being, of course, quite innocent of what had occurred during the experiment at the Manor.

" Well, after you have heard all I have to say, I think you will agree that there is radical ground upon which to suspect Mr. Brentwood ; and, further, that it will take little more to bring the crimes home to him."

Whereupon, producing the photograph, Shepperton related all that he knew.

There was a painful interval after Shepperton's story, which did not tend to make him feel very comfortable, and he glanced uneasily first from the Vicar to his sister, then back again. Alletson had risen and was pacing the room with short, nervous steps; he was clearly agitated. Constance remained looking dully at the fire. She was thinking about that weird experience she had gone through a fortnight ago, and the very thought of what she had suffered tended to unnerve her.

Unable to bear the suspense longer, Shepperton turned to the Vicar and asked in a doubtful voice:

"Don't you think my grounds of suspicion satisfactory?"

Alletson clenched his hands as though something hurt him.

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Shepperton, they seem at first sight only too clear. It is not that I question things in any way, but—but"—the words seemed to be forced from him—"you see, we have been friends."

The expression on the Vicar's face made Shepperton feel sorry that he had had to hurt his feelings.

Constance looked at her brother sympathetically, and half rose as if to go over to him; but remembering that they were not alone, sat down again.

Her movements attracted Shepperton's attention to her, and he said:

"It is fairly clear, don't you think, that Mr.

Brentwood is pretty thoroughly mixed up in this matter ? "

" There hardly seems to be any doubt about it," she replied slowly. " And further, I think I had better tell you that—that—" Her sudden hesitation caused both men to look at her significantly, eager to hear what she had to say, but no words came from her lips. Instead, she sat with open mouth, staring hard at the wall, the colour coming and going in her cheeks, and her bosom heaving as though she were suppressing some undue excitement. Shepperton stood up, and looked at her in amazement, while her brother glanced askance at the wall, thinking that he could see something there. Then jumping up, he quickly crossed the room, and taking her hand exclaimed :

" Constance, Constance, what is the matter ? "

But for a minute she did not move, and continued to stare at the wall, as though it fascinated her.

" Speak, Constance ! " But she did not seem to hear his voice. At last, heaving a deep sigh, she lay back in the chair and smiled faintly, while her face went very white.

" Fetch me some water, Philip," she whispered. He hurried to carry out her bidding, and during his absence Shepperton, evidently embarrassed, said :

" I am so sorry, Miss Alletson; I hope you are not ill. I sincerely trust that what I have said to-night has not upset you ? "

She looked at him vacantly, and then despair came into her eyes. Raising her hand to her head in a bewildered manner, she ejaculated :

" I cannot do it ! "

" Do what ? " he queried, not understanding.

But she did not answer. Instead, she rose slowly from her chair, and going to the window, looked out into the twilight which was fast gathering.

She must have stood there several minutes gazing into nothingness, and her brother, who had meanwhile entered the room, had, at a warning glance from Shepperton, come to a standstill, watching her. Shepperton noticed that his hand trembled, and sat vacantly looking at the water in the tumbler quivering from side to side, until a little of it splashed on the carpet. Involuntarily he looked at Alletson's face, and his expression told him at once that something further had occurred. Turning quickly to the figure at the window, he noticed that Constance was standing with her hands over her ears, as though to shut out some sound, and her face—which they could see in profile—was ashen colour, and set with an intensity almost agonising.

All at once she dropped her hands, and turning round to her brother remarked, in what seemed quite a rational manner :

" Philip, I am going out for a little while ! " and calmly walked towards the door. Almost instinctively her brother determined that she should not ; she was evidently not her normal self. From being nervously excited, he suddenly grew calm—men of his particular temperament usually do when confronted with danger—and quickly walking over to his sister, quietly led her into a chair, and gently,

but firmly, made her sit down. Then proffering the glass of water, said kindly :

" Drink this."

She looked at him rebelliously, as though she bitterly resented the course he had taken with her, and at first it seemed as if she would violently resist him. Indeed, he was greatly surprised at the fierce strength she showed in her eyes. But the more she struggled, the more determined he grew, and gradually, the great power of his pure and noble mind, developed to a high degree by a life of inward growth and self-sacrifice, overcame the strange abnormal manifestation of his sister's will, though she fought to the last in a way that he knew was not natural.

When she had ceased to struggle, he put the water to her lips, and she drank mechanically, then exclaiming, " Oh dear ! " she closed her eyes, and lying back in the chair, seemed to rest peacefully enough.

Gently loosing her hands, Philip put the glass of water on the table, and looked at Shepperton, who asked in a whisper :

" Shall I fetch Dr. Trestlewood ? " He did not look at all comfortable, and felt that in some way he had been the cause of this strange scene.

" No, thanks, I don't think it necessary at present at any rate," replied Alletson. " If she should get worse, I can send Martha."

" I do hope that what I have said this evening has not caused—— "

" No, no," interrupted the Vicar. " I don't for a moment think that, Mr. Shepperton."

He looked much relieved at the Vicar's remark.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"No, thank you, Mr. Shepperton, I think she will be all right shortly."

"Then I think I will be going."

They walked silently into the hall, and Alletson quietly opened the front door.

"Good night," he said kindly.

"Good night," returned the other. Then he hesitated for a moment, drumming his fingers on the door post, with a troubled look on his face. The Vicar eyed him tentatively, and at last he spoke:

"You will keep my secret about that photograph, Mr. Alletson, won't you?"

"Need you ask?" returned the Vicar. "You gave me your confidence, and I shall respect it."

Shepperton looked apologetic, and then, with expressive thanks, shook hands and took his departure.

Carefully closing the door, Alletson quickly returned to the dining-room, and, glancing at his sister, satisfied himself that she was resting peacefully enough by the fire.

"Do you feel better, Constance?" he asked in his kind voice.

She sighed, and did not answer at once. At last she said emotionally, "Yes, Philip, thanks to you," and her eyes filled with tears.

"All right," he answered soothingly. "Don't worry, my dear; sit quietly while I write two or three letters."

He saw that she was distressed, and, much as he wanted to know what it was that had upset her, he refrained from asking questions.

Obtaining ink and paper from his own room, he settled himself down, and for nearly half an hour nothing was audible but the occasional scratching of his pen and the falling in of the fire, as it gradually burned away.

He had barely sealed the last envelope, when a sort of scratching noise on the French window caused them both to turn suddenly.

"What's that?" queried Constance in a startled voice.

She had hardly spoken, when a mournful howl came from outside, followed by the unmistakable whimper of a dog. With a frown the Vicar rose, and, walking straight to the window, deliberately opened it. He had no sooner done so, when, to his surprise and annoyance, a great dog pushed past him, and, going up to his sister, put his muzzle in her hand, and started wagging his tail with evident delight.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Why, it's Hector!"

Alletson's astonishment was so great, that for a moment he could only look; then he made a remark which the average person would be shocked to hear from the lips of a clergyman.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed irritably, and then, sitting down, he started to laugh heartily as the comical side of the thing appealed to him.

He was brought to a sudden halt in his merriment by Constance remarking:

" Philip, it may appear funny, but what on earth has brought the animal to me ? "

Her brother assumed his usual gravity, and, after thinking a moment, shook his head.

" Anyway, he can't stay here."

Rising, he opened the door, and said in a loud voice:

" Here, get out ! "

The dog, who had settled himself down by Constance's chair, raised his head for a moment on hearing the Vicar's voice, and eyed him contemptuously, as much as to say, " Put me out, then," and resumed his previous position.

Crossing the room, Alletson seized the dog's collar, and started to pull him toward the door.

" Come out of it, you brute ! " he said sternly.

Hector, with a shake of his great head, freed himself, and coolly lay down again by the chair.

The Vicar sat down, an amused look in his eyes; then he said :

" Perhaps he will go for you, Constance ? "

" Possibly," she replied. She rose and walked to the door; the dog immediately followed, so, opening the front door, she made as if to go out; and as soon as the animal crossed the threshold, she slipped back, and shut him out. But she had hardly got back to the dining-room before a loud howling was heard outside. They listened for a time, hoping that he would go away, but he kept whimpering and scratching the door, and eventually made such a row that Martha appeared with a scared look on her face.

" Don't be frightened, Martha," said her mistress; " it is only a dog."

Martha went back to the kitchen doubtingly.

"We had better let him in, Philip, and send a note to the Manor to ask Mr. Brentwood to fetch him away in the morning."

Her brother nodded, and reached for ink and paper, while she went to the door and opened it. Hector immediately stopped howling, and, following Constance into the house, went and resumed his old position by her chair in the dining-room.

"It is quite beyond my comprehension, Philip."

"It is extraordinary," he replied, without ceasing to write.

"Wherever shall we put him?"

"He cannot stop in the house, that's certain," responded the Vicar.

But Hector decided that problem for himself. He slept on the mat outside Miss Alletson's bedroom door.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POWER OF THE MYSTIC

"AGAR HALFI, I've lost that photograph of the footprints!"

A surprised look entered the Hindoo's eyes as he gazed at the Master of Storton, who was leaning easily against the mantelpiece of the breakfast-room.

"It may be awkward, Sahib, if *some* people find it."

Brentwood smiled.

"The worst of it is, I have lost it outside somewhere. I had it in the pocket of my shooting jacket on the morning I first went to the priory, and it is not there now. I know for certain that I did not take it out when I returned home."

"You have the original, Sahib."

"True; but what I am concerned about is, that whoever happens to find it may take it to the police, who, you will remember, took great care to have copied exact impressions of the footmarks that were found beside the body of the Rev. Henry Thornton, and, as we only too well know, they are the same!"

"If anyone had found it, you would most probably have heard something before now."

"That seems reasonable enough. Still, I wish I had it safely here."

He stood thinking for a time, and then, dismissing the matter from his mind for a moment, said :

" I expect, like me, you have been wondering how this evil thing got over here ? "

The Hindoo folded his arms and shook his head solemnly.

" What concerns me more," he replied, " is that we do not know how to cope with it."

" I'm afraid it baffles me," returned Brentwood. " Has it, then, exhausted all *your* powers ? "

" No, Sahib, I cannot say that, because a man does not know the limit of his power until it is really tested. But up to the present it has mystified me."

" It does not appear to correspond in principle to anything we have met," said Brentwood meditatively.

" If I speak my mind, Sahib, I feel that this evil thing is impervious to any attack by man from the physical plane."

The Master of Storton looked at him thoughtfully, as he replied :

" If that is true, Agar Halfi, then there is only one possible way to deal with it, at least to our knowledge, and that is——"

" With an almost certain risk of death," interrupted the other.

Brentwood nodded slowly, then remarked :

" Well, we shall see. Now, to go back to my original question. Why should it be here where we are ? Remember that, so far as we know, you and I are the only two people in England who have met with it. Has it followed us ? "

"I do not know about that, Sahib. It is five years and more since we encountered the hobgoblin in Afghanistan, and surely if it has followed us, why did it not do so immediately?"

"That argument seems reasonable enough, my friend, but it does not necessarily follow that it is right."

"Your Western theory of astronomy is accepted because it is the most reasonable, but it does not necessarily follow that it is right."

Brentwood laughed outright, and then replied:

"I don't think your analogy is quite right, Agar Halfi. The alternative to your argument is not a very feasible one, whereas in my case it is quite a probable one. The thing may have followed us here directly we came!"

"Then why has it not manifested before?" returned the Oriental quickly.

"That, of course, is the natural answer to my remark," replied Brentwood, "and it constitutes the doubtful point in my theory. However, we shall see how things develop."

Having spoken, the Master of Storton looked down at the curb, and started kicking it with the toe of his boot. At length he remarked:

"Agar Halfi, why don't you go back to India and found a school of your own? You know very well that you have control of a force which, so far as you are aware, no one else but myself possesses, and yet you are content to stay here, masquerading as the chauffeur of a well-to-do Englishman."

"If you wish your servant to depart, he will do

so, Sahib, but otherwise he is satisfied to stay here for the present."

"Don't misunderstand me," returned Brentwood quickly. "So long as you want to stay with me, you know you can; I am honoured by your presence, and I do not wish to inquire into your reasons for so doing. But life is short, at least on this plane, and I sometimes feel that you are wasting valuable time."

"There are certain things which I have got to do," he answered slowly. "When they are accomplished, perhaps I shall go back to my own country. But for the time, Sahib, I will stay with you."

"That is entirely for you to decide," replied Brentwood. "You know my mind on the matter."

"For one thing," went on Agar Halfi, "you are my friend, and I wish to be near you. A man is not dishonoured because he serves those he loves. Far better to be a man's lacquey than eat the bread of idleness in his house."

The Master of Storton's face softened as his companion spoke, and there was a warm ring in his voice as he said:

"Your high devotion belittles me; it is greater than any white man's that I know. Though you are the only one, I am rich in friends."

There was an awkward pause, neither man having anything to say. At length Brentwood broke the silence by asking abruptly, "What do you make of this?" whereupon he produced a letter, and handed it to the Hindoo.

Agar Halfi read it with an expressionless face.

"THE VICARAGE,
WORLSTOKE, SOMERSET,
May 19—.

"DEAR BRENTWOOD,—You will no doubt be surprised to hear that Hector arrived here to-night about 7 o'clock, and, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, will not leave my sister! No doubt you will be relieved to hear where he is, and perhaps you will send for him in the morning.

"Yours sincerely,
"PHILIP ALLETSON."

"I will fetch him, Sahib."

"Yes, but what do you think about it?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"One thing," continued Brentwood—"I noticed that he seemed to take a great fancy to Miss Alletson the first time they met; but beyond that I fail to understand the animal's action."

"Dogs are particularly susceptible to mental and psychic influences," returned the Oriental, "and probably something in the lady attracts the dog to her. It is doubtful if it could have any bearing on the mystery."

"Perhaps not, but still it will be as well to note what takes place in the future. You see more of the dog than I do, so perhaps you will watch him."

"Very good, Sahib, and now I will go and fetch him." Saying which, he saluted in soldier fashion, and, turning on his heel, went through the doorway.

The Master of Storton followed him with his eyes as he went out, and there was a strange smile on his face as he remarked half aloud:

"Probably the most highly developed mind I have ever met, and undoubtedly the truest man."

As Agar Halfi strode along the road to the Vicarage, his mind was full of ominous forebodings. He felt depressed, and his Oriental intelligence, which interpreted things in a different way to a European's, warned him that trouble was not far away. He had read it in the stars, could detect it in the aura around him, and, indeed, he knew from his master's horoscope that a dangerous period was at hand. Probably it was for that reason he was not going back to India just yet. In any case, he did not mean to leave his beloved friend at a time when trouble was looming.

It was not for nothing that the evil death which he had once faced in Afghanistan had come to the neighbourhood of Storton. In some way he gathered that it must have some connection with what happened to them five years ago, and until the mystery was cleared up he would remain.

But how were they going to encounter it with success? Ah, that was another matter, for, deeply as he was learned in mystic law, he felt that he was powerless to overcome this horror at present.

If it had been a vampire, a werewolf, or any other evil thing that emanated from the malignant rays of the planet Saturn, he could have dealt with it, for his knowledge held the key to the forces which sprung from that great sphere to plague humanity. If it had been an elemental, or any evil from the astral plane, governed by the planet Uranus, he might have hoped to cope with it; but the fire charm he had wrought that night,

five years ago, had not availed, except to ward off death. And such a charm as he had fashioned was, as he knew, sufficient to neutralise any astral evil.

Deep down in his mind, he was conscious that this weird thing was a psychic manifestation, under the rule of the adverse rays of Neptune, the forces from which star were now slowly beginning to become active in the affairs of humanity. Little was known of the power of its rays, except that the results were evil, and, although the occultists were studying it closely, so slow was its progress through the heavens, that years must elapse before its effects could be understood to any apparent degree, let alone mastered.

For that matter, it was doubtful if there were a dozen men who held the key to the planet Uranus and the astral plane! So what could he, a simple seeker after truth in the mystic arcana, hope to accomplish against the forces of the unknown psychic plane? It were doubtful if the powers of a Mahatma would avail.

And yet, as he walked quickly along, this strange man resolved that he would combat this dread thing, though he knew it would be at the risk of his life. And the unselfish reason that caused this resolution was—

Well, that is Agar Halfi's secret for the present.

In the meantime, he had reached the Vicarage. To his enquiry for the Vicar, Martha said that the master was out, but that Miss Alletson would be pleased to see him. The maid showed him into the drawing-room, and her eyes never left his face once. Besides the fact that the Hindoo was a

curiosity to be stared at, the presence of this dark-skinned man fascinated Martha, and for a space she stood looking at him as though glued to the carpet, probably wondering whether he was an ogre, who would eat her. All sorts of fearful things flitted through her rustic mind. Visions of knives, pistols, and implements of torture. Meanwhile, Agar Halfi, who had taken a seat, turned his eye toward her, as she stood in the doorway. That settled Martha; suppressing a shriek, she turned and fled. And, as she confided to her best friend the next time she saw her, "he must be a dreadful man, his eyes looked through and through me, and I'm sure he knew all that I was thinking about."

Constance entered the room just after, and greeted her visitor with a pleasant smile, though her pale cheeks and hollow eyes bore evidence of the strain she had experienced the previous evening.

On her heels followed Hector, who no sooner saw the Hindoo than he stood stock-still and looked at him dejectedly, as though uncertain what to do, while his tail traversed a descending arc.

Agar Halfi considered him for a moment grimly, then in his deep voice he exclaimed, "Come here!"

With a spiritless look, the dog went over to him and lay down.

Constance could not help laughing as she remembered her brother's futile efforts to turn him out the night before, and compared them with the simple victory that Agar Halfi had achieved.

"Until you came, he simply would not leave me, and last night he lay on the mat outside my bedroom door."

"And what do you think about his behaviour?" asked the Hindoo in his grave way.

Constance, who had dropped into a chair, was talking quite easily to her visitor, whom she naturally treated as her equal. Further, she felt quite comfortable, and sub-consciously noticed that there was not present any of that instinctive reserve which intuitively a woman is aware of when talking to a man who is practically a stranger.

A smile parted her lips, showing her excellent teeth, as she replied:

"That is the very question I was going to put to you. Still, as you have anticipated my inquiry, it is only fair that I should answer first. Frankly, I cannot dismiss the matter from my mind as a mere trifle. There must be some reason for the dog's conduct. When first we met, he seemed to take an extraordinary liking to me, but I can hardly think that that would be the cause."

"It rather points to it, Miss Alletson."

"Can you suggest any other reason?"

"No," he replied, "I cannot, yet I do not think that what you have intimated will explain the dog's strange behaviour."

"Is not that what is called 'woman's logic'?" she queried, with a sparkle in her eyes.

Agar Halfi looked steadily at her as he answered:

"I submit to the rebuke contained in your remark, Miss Alletson—we men deserve it. But, if I may say so without arrogance, I would answer that I know emphatically there is another reason for the animal coming to you, but what it is I am at

present quite ignorant. Some day I may be able to tell you."

She looked at him in genuine surprise.

"Do you know, that what we called an educated white man would blush to make such a statement, Mr. Agar Halfi? He would at once think it an insult to his reason."

"And yet you don't think so!" interjected the Hindoo.

"How do you know that?" she asked sharply.

"Simply because the faculty of intuition by which I was enabled to make the statement is one which is well developed in most women, but in few men. The general life of a woman tends to its growth, whereas men depend almost solely upon reason, and thereby lose much that they might otherwise know.

It is usually by the combination of these two faculties that genius is produced; and the rareness of genius is probably caused by the fact that reason and intuition cannot dwell together in what is called the average mind, as they appear to contradict each other, though in reality they are true affinities."

"I have never heard anyone speak as you have spoken, Mr. Agar Halfi, though in a dim sort of way I have had similar ideas; but until your lucid explanation it has not been clear to me. Yes, I think I entirely agree with what you say. Now, why don't women develop the faculty of reason?"

"They are doing so slowly, in the same way that men are developing the faculty of intuition. The difference is that in the former case, the lack of

growth is due to centuries of suppression, and not until men realise that they must give women their freedom will the growth of reason fully develop. But before that time comes, women will no doubt have wrested themselves free from their chains by their own efforts. On the other hand, the growth of intuition in men is to some extent retarded by the fact that they do not think women capable of teaching them anything worth knowing, and yet it is only by the freedom of women from men's yoke that men can reach their own full development. They have clung too much to the physical, and practically ignored all else."

Constance sat in silent wonder, listening to this strange man discourse on topics in a manner which she thought would put to shame many of the so-called educated units of her own country, and she could not understand how it was that he should be merely a servant in an Englishman's household. Still, that was not her business, and, after all, what did it matter whether a man was a servant or a master, so long as he was a man ? But that mystified her ; a man with such a personality and of such intelligence, should not need to be a servant. She did not understand that economic conditions of life brought about queer results.

While she sat thinking, the Hindoo was studying her face. At last he remarked :

" You are not in the best of health, Miss Alletson ; have you had a shock ? "

She started slightly as he correctly diagnosed the cause of her indisposition.

" Well," she answered, a little confused, " I was

rather upset last night, but I feel better now— " She almost added, " since you came in," but checked herself in time.

As if he understood, Agar Halfi replied simply :

" You will feel better this afternoon ! "

" I expect I shall naturally," she answered, with a suspicion of a smile.

" I do not mean that, lady. I say that practically all traces of your indisposition will have vanished before three o'clock."

" Indeed ! " she queried.

But the Hindoo did not satisfy her by responding to her question.

Suddenly, she did not know why, and had not had the least intention of doing so, she found herself relating to her visitor a dream she experienced the previous evening.

" I do not know at all how it came about, Mr. Agar Halfi, but suddenly I seemed to stand in a wild rocky region in a strange land, and there before me, standing with outstretched hands, was a man of your own country. His dress was similar to that of a priest, and he looked at me with a stern expression of warning. In his left hand he held the number 15, and in his right hand a cross. I suppose he meant to convey something to me, but I do not understand symbols. Do you know anything about them ? Somehow I feel that you do."

While she spoke, the Hindoo's countenance grew graver, and she noted with alarm that he seemed perturbed.

" Why did you tell me this ? " he asked in an unnatural voice.

"Really," she replied, a little distressed, "I could not say; it seemed to come from me involuntarily. Is it anything serious?"

"Yes, it is serious, Miss Alletson, but please do not be disturbed at what I am going to say. I will interpret your dream. A fortnight before the disappearance of Mr. Thornton, your brother's predecessor, I had a very similar dream, the only difference being that instead of the man holding in his left hand the number 15, he held a chart of the heavens, and in his right hand the number 13 instead of the cross."

She looked at him incredulously.

"Can it be possible?"

He smiled, and answered:

"I will describe the man. He was tall and gaunt with a long grey beard, and his garments hung loosely over him, leaving his arms almost bare."

"That is almost exactly the same," she said excitedly. "Now what can these dreams mean?"

"I will interpret them," he answered slowly.

"The vision was of a holy man, who went forth to exorcise, and was killed by an evil similar to that which is now present in this district."

Constance felt a cold shiver pass over her.

"Now in my dream," continued the Hindoo, "the chart he held in his left hand meant the horoscope of Fate, that which is to be. The number 13 in his right hand is the symbol of death. Roughly speaking, Mr. Thornton was killed thirteen days after I had that vision. In your dream the number 15 in his left hand is the symbol

of the devil, or evil. The cross in the right hand means that the evil can be overcome by that means."

Constance trembled in spite of her brave efforts not to do so, and her lips were dry and white as she said almost in a whisper, "I always wear a gold cross," and she held it up in her fingers for him to see. It was fastened by a chain of the same material, which hung round her neck.

"Never let it leave your body," he said warningly. "It is more potent than many people think."

"And so these two dreams appear to be connected with the tragedy?"

"Yes, there does not seem to be much doubt about that," he returned.

"Don't you think we ought to meet and talk things over?" she asked.

"I will put it to the Sahib when I return, Miss Alletson."

"Quite so," she retorted; "but I want your own opinion as well."

"I do not know, Miss Alletson," he said gravely. "I am not certain how things will turn out. Really, I must be going; I did not know it was so late."

Constance looked at the clock and exclaimed: "Oh! how time flies. Philip will be in to lunch any minute now. Won't you stay and have some with us?"

"I feel honoured by your request, Miss Alletson, but unfortunately it is quite impossible for me to stay."

"Well, another time I shall not take a refusal, Mr. Agar Halfi," she said with a bright laugh.

Calling Hector to him, the Hindoo took his departure, with apologies for keeping his hostess such a long period.

"Oh, that is just my fault," she answered. "I was so absorbed in what we were talking about, that I forgot the time."

Agar Halfi had barely gone five minutes before Philip walked in, and his first words to Constance were:

"Why, you look ever so much better than you did when I went out this morning."

"Yes," she retorted. "If a flushed face through hurrying, and eyes made bright with excitement go for anything. But seriously, Philip, I do feel much better, and strangely the change came when Mr. Agar Halfi called for Hector."

"Oh! Then that animal has gone at last?"

"Yes; but come and have lunch, I am sure you must be hungry, and I have a lot to tell you."

While they ate she related what had happened during the morning, and she seemed so very interested, that Philip wondered for a moment whether the Hindoo could possibly have influenced her. But he discarded the idea almost immediately, he knew his sister too well.

"It is rather strange that Brentwood should not have mentioned the coincidence of the footprints before this," he remarked coldly, when she had finished. "It is a week since we found poor Thornton's body."

"That is what I cannot understand," she answered.

"It looks rather as if he did not intend to tell us, and perhaps—very probably, his man has made a *faux pas* in mentioning the matter?"

"Do you really think, Philip, that Mr. Brentwood is guilty in any way?"

Philip looked at her steadily as he replied:

"Honestly, I don't. I cannot think such a man would be capable of such a crime. What is your opinion—the same as mine?"

"No!" Alletson stared, while Constance resolutely looked at the tablecloth.

"What!" he exclaimed.

She lifted some crumbs from the cloth on to her plate with a knife, then raising her eyes and looking straight at her brother, she answered firmly:

"I fully believe that he is guilty!"

"You believe——!"

"Yes, Philip, and I will tell you why."

She then related in detail what occurred during the experiment at the Manor. Her brother listened rather impatiently. He was hurt to think that his sister should have withheld anything from him.

"And is that what you were going to tell Mr. Shepperton and me last night?"

"Yes, Philip, but I could not. Some power compelled me to keep silent. I knew that something strange and uncanny was in the room, close by me, and I could not command my voice."

"But how does this make Brentwood guilty, Constance?"

"Can't you see, Philip? Don't you understand?

That feeling of horror I suffered and that dreadful something I felt at first compelled to find behind the man's eyes, and which afterwards I knew was seeking me, is this evil which has killed Mr. Thornton, and no doubt Elsie Hobson. To be blunt, it is Mr. Brentwood, it is *he* who is the evil."

She spoke with such vehemence that her brother sat staring at her dumbfounded for fully a minute after she had finished. Then as it dawned upon him what she meant, he gave vent to a short bitter laugh. To think that she, his sister, should appear to be so fully convinced of his friend's guilt, when in his own mind he had no doubt about his innocence, was irony.

Suddenly he looked at her intently, and said in a low voice :

" And last night when you went to the window ? "

" Yes, I was looking toward the ruins ! "

" And—and when you put your hands to your ears ? "

Her voice trembled as she answered :

" It was to shut out that awful alluring call, which seemed to be for me alone."

The Vicar felt a shiver pass down his back, as he called to mind his own experience.

" And the dog ? "

Constance shook her head. " I don't understand that at all."

For some time neither spoke a word. What they had been discussing seemed even there, in that cheerful room in broad daylight, to have the power to cast a shadow over their spirits.

At length Philip asked gently :

" Why did you not tell me at the time what you suffered during that experiment ? "

" Well, Philip, partly because I did not want to hurt you in any way, unless I was quite sure that there was something wrong, and indeed I would not, even in my mind, think ill of any one without sufficient cause. But now I feel no doubt of it."

He nodded spiritlessly, in agreement with what she had said, then remarked :

" And partly what else ? "

She turned her head away, and commenced toying with her fingers, and he saw that she was trembling just a little.

" Really, Philip, I'm afraid I don't know. But there *was* something else, which I cannot understand."

He looked at her uneasily, not knowing what to think. Her attitude was so unlike her real self; she was usually so frank and brave. Now she seemed all to pieces, and unnerved.

" Surely it was not because you were afraid to speak, my dear girl ? " he asked kindly.

" Oh no," she returned quickly ; " you know I'm not like that."

" Then was it—" he stopped abruptly, for, with what sounded very much like a sob, Constance had risen swiftly and left the room.

The Vicar fell back in his chair perplexed, amazed, and for the second time that week he forgot himself, and exclaimed :

" Good Lord ! "

CHAPTER XIV

HERBERT CANNING, LONDON

"PLEASE, sir, the gentleman says he has an appointment with you."

Arthur Shepperton looked keenly at the pale, sharp face of the boy who addressed him, and then stared abstractedly at the card he held in his fingers, while he muttered to himself: "One hundred pounds for a month!"

He mechanically read the card, which was as follows:

"HERBERT CANNING,
LONDON,"

and then added to himself: "Late of Scotland Yard."

"Ah yes, of course; Baxter, show him in, please," and he turned to his desk to finish reading through the last two paragraphs of an agreement.

Scarcely had he finished, when there entered a tall gaunt man, whose feet seemed so big that they made him shamble rather than walk. Shepperton wished him good morning, and invited him to take a seat.

Mr. Canning, in a voice absurdly small for so big a man, remarked idly that the weather was warm for the time of the year, and abstracting a large coloured handkerchief from a huge pocket, proceeded to wipe his head with it.

Shepperton glanced him up and down quickly, and smiled inwardly at the deceptiveness of the man, who looked too clumsy and dull for anything. And yet he had the reputation of being one of the shrewdest and, when necessary, quickest men in action that had ever passed through the Department.

His hair was dull brown and of the thatchy type; no parting was visible in it, and, with his ill-fitting clothes, it helped to make him appear just what he was not—stupid. Like his feet, his hands were huge, but close inspection revealed supple, mobile fingers, which indicated strength, as indeed did his whole appearance. Shepperton, although five feet nine inches, and fairly well-built, felt small as he looked at him.

Mr. Canning was quite unconcerned by the other's scrutiny, in fact he lazily gazed out of the window during the process, as though unconscious of it. All at once he turned a pair of piercing grey eyes on his scrutiniser, and said abruptly:

"Well, do I suit?"

To his vexation, Shepperton started in his chair, it was done so suddenly and neatly; and then he smiled sourly, as his interlocutor gave vent to a short dry laugh.

For the next hour they conversed without pause. Then Shepperton rose, and with a look of some satisfaction on his face, started to walk across the room, and back again, in a spirited way. Leaning forward over the back of his chair, and grasping the arms of it with his hands, he said:

"The so-called mystery is merely a blind to cover

himself. I don't think there is a word of truth in it, although he appears to have very neatly got the Vicar and his sister to fall into the trap. Still, they may have altered their minds after what I told them the other day."

"And what is this Hindoo like, whom you mentioned is a servant of this man?"

"Well," replied Shepperton, looking at the ceiling, "I should think he is a very capable villain, almost as clever as his master. He possesses what looks like hypnotic power, but I have seen so little of him that it is difficult to say; I can only speak from what I have heard."

"And all the trouble seems to be centred round the ruins of this old priory, and this Mr. Brentwood and his Eastern servant?"

Shepperton nodded.

"Though," continued the detective, "there is so far no evidence against them except the photograph of those footprints you found, which as far as I can see undoubtedly belongs to him, as it bears his initials at the back."

Shepperton nodded again. "It is rather thin, I will admit, but I don't think you will be disappointed, Mr. Canning."

"The sooner I see those ruins the better," remarked the other, rising and stretching himself indolently. Then sharply, and with a keen look: "Can you meet me there in an hour?"

Shepperton shook his head. "Quite impossible, business won't permit it this morning."

"Very well, I will go myself." With that he turned and strode toward the door.

"Half a minute," called out Shepperton. "What about some lodgings?"

"Oh, I fixed those up before I came here. My address is Mrs. Brown, Myrtle Cottage, about a mile outside Worlstoke." Then without saying good morning he disappeared.

Shepperton watched the door close behind him, and stood for a moment, with a half frown, half laugh on his face.

"What an extraordinary individual!" he muttered; "and he costs one hundred pounds a month."

The next moment the telephone bell rang, and Shepperton immediately forgot the detective in the vicissitudes of business.

It was eleven o'clock when Mr. Canning left the offices of Dalby & Co. At two o'clock he was sitting on a part of the crumbled wall of the ruined chapel in the priory, idly eating bread and cheese with a clasp knife and, incidentally, earning his salary. Yet, during the three hours that had elapsed since he departed from Shepperton, he had passed a busy time. By twelve he had been and compared his employer's photograph of the footprints with the impressions at the Westsea police headquarters. Half an hour later he was drinking ale in the Worlstoke village hostel, and at one o'clock he was watching an Englishman and a Hindoo drawing strange hieroglyphics on the flagstones of the chapel floor in the priory.

While he ate, he thought. Of course, the two men he at once knew, from what Shepperton had told him. They were the Master of Storton and his

servant, Agar Halfi. No doubt this little work of art was part of their game to throw dust in other people's eyes, as suggested by Mr. Shepperton. But Mr. Herbert Canning did not jump to conclusions, it was not his business.

Still munching his frugal fare, he looked all around him and, as far as he could, memorised the place for future guidance.

Then the channel of his thoughts changed, and he repeated slowly :

" Vicar : medium height, slight stoop, iron grey hair, kindly face, about forty. His sister : between twenty-five and thirty, brown wavy hair, good-looking, neat figure, medium height, dark blue eyes, bright and pleasing. Priory haunted ! So much for half a pint of ale—good."

Rising, he yawned, and brushing the crumbs carefully from his coat, leisurely walked down to the village, and depositing himself on a seat on the green, dosed pleasantly under the influence of the warm afternoon sun.

While the detective slept, the unravelling of the mystery upon which he was engaged went on at headlong pace, thereby saving him an immense amount of time and labour, also his employer's pocket ; but nothing disturbed his dreams to tell him so.

Two or three of the villagers stopped to stare at the stranger with his long legs crossed over each other, and his hands deep in his trouser pockets, and even the Master of Storton looked at him curiously as he drove past in his motor-car on his way to the Vicarage.

"Queer-looking chap," he thought, as he pulled up at Alletson's gate, and then dismissed him from his mind.

"I should like to see Miss Alletson if she is at home."

"Yes, sir," said Martha importantly, as she pushed back a piece of rebellious yellow hair behind her cap, and smoothed down her neat apron. "Miss Alletson is in; will you please walk into the dining-room?"

Constance stopped and took a deep breath to compose herself before she went in.

Brentwood rose a little awkwardly as she entered, and after exchanging greetings there was an uncomfortable pause. The Master of Storton was disagreeably aware that there was a difference since they last met, and just for a moment he looked at her guiltily, as he thought that the cause must be what had happened during the experiment at the Manor. It could not have been more than momentary, and then his face assumed its natural grave and stern expression. But slight as the change was, it did not escape Constance's quick eye, and simply helped to confirm her belief that he was the culprit.

As he stood with one hand on the mantelpiece and the other in the pocket of his motor-coat, she could not help seeing that he was handsome, even noble-looking, and strong as was her feeling that he was guilty, deep down in her heart she sincerely wished that he was innocent.

There was something about the man which appealed to her as no other man had ever done.

What it was she did not know, and she put it down to his personal magnetism.

Still she had a part to play, in loyalty to Mr. Shepperton, and much as she disliked her task, she would not go back on her word.

She breathed a little more freely as his voice, in cold level tones, broke the silence.

"I was sorry to hear from my Hindoo friend of your indisposition, Miss Alletson, but am glad to see that you are looking pretty well now. Can I do anything for you, or has Dr. Trestlewood successfully dealt with your case?"

"I'm practically recovered now, Mr. Brentwood. I immediately felt a change after Mr. Agar Halfi had called; his presence somehow seemed to do me a lot of good."

"It is more than probable that he may have cured you without saying anything about it, Miss Alletson; he has the power to do so!"

"Really," she replied, surprised. "Anyway, I am much better, but I thank you for calling on my——"

"Don't, please," he interrupted a little harshly. "The truth is I had another purpose in calling, which I'm afraid is a selfish one."

He paused, and she looked at him coldly, then turned her eyes to the window.

Noticing her attitude, he hesitated as to whether he would broach the subject at all. However, having come over particularly to speak about what happened to her during the experiment at the Manor, he decided that it would be folly not to clear the thing up, now he had the opportunity.

" I hope you will not think me impertinent, Miss Alletson," he began lamely. She sat down slowly, while he hesitated, choosing his words. She knew at once what he was going to say, and her compressed lips indicated that she had braced herself for an unpleasant interview. She felt it would be a trial for her.

Then he came abruptly to the point.

" During the experiment that was held at my house, you experienced something which, according to the known laws of hypnotism, should not have occurred. Is not that so ? "

" Yes."

His dark eyes hardened a little at her tone, which plainly indicated that the subject was distasteful. The strong fighting nature of the man instinctively rose to the surface at the idea of resistance ; to overcome obstacles was one of the charms of his life. But he just as suddenly remembered that she was a lady, and his breeding forced back the primitive impulse.

He was not a courtier, however, and his next words were blunt and to the point :

" If you would rather not discuss this matter, I will withdraw at once."

Constance took a deep breath, and rising from her chair faced him squarely, as she replied :

" If you are in earnest, I shall be only too glad to tell you all about it ! "

" In earnest ? " he echoed, and his face grew cold and hard.

" Yes, Mr. Brentwood, if you are in earnest," she replied in a suppressed voice. Her blue eyes,

defiant and hostile, met his brown ones, cold and unemotional, and for a time her will fought his. She felt he was playing with her and was angry; but she might as well have pitted herself against a rock, and gradually she gave way.

"I am certainly in earnest," he said slowly and deliberately, and although his voice was icy, his manner was perfectly courteous.

Constance sat down again, fully expecting him to ask her why she had asked such a question; but in that she was disappointed, for he remained standing in frigid silence.

"Well, I will tell you," and she related in detail what she had experienced. All the time she was speaking, she watched his face closely, but could not read a sign from his set features.

When she had finished, he thanked her and said:

"May I tell you what has subsequently transpired in this connection?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

"Well, it troubled me, Miss Alletson, so I decided to test the thing. I went straight to Mr. Agar Halfi, who, as you will know, is experienced in these matters, with the intention of putting him into the sleep, so as to see what impression it made on him. But he was not in; he had not returned from driving you and your brother home. While waiting—I knew he would not be long away—it occurred to me that I might as well experiment on the dog; so I did. All went well until the sleep was practically in evidence, and then he exhibited similar symptoms to what you did."

" And what happened ? " interrupted Constance, who had become unconsciously interested.

" Well, he broke away from my influence, and for a moment I lost control. In that instant he suddenly made as if to attack me ; but I recovered myself quickly and stopped him."

" He might have hurt you," she said slowly.

" Hurt me ! " he replied with an amused laugh. " He would undoubtedly have killed me. I was not armed in any way, and no man could stand the attack of a dog like Hector."

She started involuntarily.

" Just then," he continued, " Agar Halfi came in, and I told him all about it. Then I experimented on him, fully expecting the same symptoms, but to my surprise it passed off quite normally. After that, Agar Halfi put the dog to sleep without the least difficulty." He paused, then added :

" You see, Miss Alletson, the matter is also an uncomfortable one from my standpoint."

Constance tapped the table with her fingers. She hardly knew what to think, he spoke so sincerely. And yet all the time he had been in the room she had been conscious of something about him that made her cold and shivery, as though he were some dreadful thing, dressed up for the time being in the shape of a gentleman. She shuddered, but controlling herself with an effort, remarked quietly :

" You had the same results with the dog as you had with me. What has been the effect on the dog ? "

" Why, he will not come near me ! "

" And yet he came voluntarily to me ! "

He stared at her meditatively, then suddenly seemed to realise something. The thought had no sooner entered his head than he bluntly asked :

" Has it had the same effect on you as it had on the dog ? "

She inclined her head.

He drew in his breath slowly, and as he did so he seemed to realise something else.

" Can it be that you suspect me ? " he asked in an unnatural voice.

But Constance had turned her face so that he could not read it, and she sat perfectly silent.

He opened his mouth as if to speak again, and then pride altered his mind. Grasping his hat, he strode quickly from the room, and a minute later Constance half-consciously heard his car drive away, while she traced patterns on the table with her finger. For several minutes she sat thus, as though in a dream, and then something warm and moist falling on her hand roused her, and with a low cry, as though she were suffering, she rose and swiftly left the room.

CHAPTER XV

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

WHEN Mr. Canning awoke from his siesta it was nearly four o'clock, but he did not rise immediately. After getting his eyes accustomed to the light, he drew from one of his many pockets a prophetic almanac! Yes, it is true, even detectives have their little weaknesses. It was for the current year, and bore on the title-page the word "Raphael" in large letters.

Turning to the month of February, he looked at the 21st day, and his eyes grew interested as he noticed that it was "Full Moon." He next turned to the 4th of April and read "New Moon." Again he turned to the 19th of April, and this time it was "Full Moon." He then thought what day of the month it was, and turning to it, read "3rd of May, New Moon."

There was a momentary tightening of his thin lips, and, dropping the almanac on his knees, he exclaimed under his breath, "Holy Moses!" He looked up at the blue sky, and began to whistle a plaintive air. When he had nearly finished, he made a false note, and stopped abruptly, evidently annoyed. "I'm always going wrong just there," he muttered. Recommencing, he went through it again. Satisfied, he put the almanac in his pocket, remarking to himself: "And but for this little

hobby of mine, I would not have known it was queer that I should start on this particular job on the 3rd of May ! "

He then mentally tabulated the following points :

(*a*) Rev. Henry Thornton disappeared 21st of February, when the moon was at the full.

(*b*) Miss Elsie Hobson disappeared 4th of April, at the time of the new moon.

(*c*) Rev. Philip Alletson had a strange experience 19th of April, when the moon was at the full.

All the outstanding incidents in this case occurred at the time of the new and full moon. Therefore, he argued, such incidents are likely to occur again at the time of the new and full moon.

Now to-day, 3rd of May, it was new moon ! He paused in his reflections, and abstracting a large red handkerchief, blew his nose so loudly that it startled into wakefulness old William Watkins, the pensioned-off village policeman, who was just nodding off to sleep on a seat not many yards away.

The glare that William gave him from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, as he leaned in a choleric manner on his ash stick, was sufficient to slay a dozen detectives if looks could kill, but fortunately Mr. Canning was not conscious of it, for at that moment he was slowly returning the handkerchief to his pocket. As he jammed it down as far as it would go, he remarked to himself :

" No doubt, Herbert Canning, you will have a nice entertainment if you visit the priory to-night. Yes, you had better go, there is no charge for admission."

Rising, he started off in the direction of Myrtle Cottage, and remarked in a cheerful voice as he passed the old gentleman that it was a pleasant afternoon. The adding of this insult to the already administered injury, did not tend to pacify Mr. Watkins, who between his chokes of indignation spluttered something which was certainly not complimentary; but by that time the tall stranger had passed out of earshot.

Arriving at his apartments, the detective requested Mrs. Brown to get him a substantial meal by a quarter to six. Then, much to that lady's annoyance and surprise, he went and had a good wash in the kitchen, of course, just when she wanted to use the sink, and dried himself on the roller towel on the door!

"Lor' bless the man!" she said to herself irritably, "as if he couldn't have done it upstairs, where I have put everything to his hand." And if it had not been that her lodger had paid her fifty per cent. more than she usually obtained, and half of it in advance too, it is probable that she would have questioned his "bringings-up."

When Mr. Canning reached the ruins, it would have been difficult to recognise Mrs. Brown's lodger, for a black wig, moustache, and beard disguised his features. It was just seven o'clock, and the light was beginning to fade. Avoiding the door in the wall, he made a detour to the south, and scaling the wall about two hundred yards further on, dropped into that part of the grounds which must have been at one time a garden. Crossing it to the west, he climbed the opposite wall, and then,

turning abruptly north, travelled along the outside of it until he arrived at the east end of the chapel.

Having satisfied himself that no one was about, he stood for a time, taking in details. To his mind, this was very necessary, as he expected the place would play a prominent part in the case he had under investigation.

The day had been exceptionally warm for the time of year, and now, in the gathering twilight, as the air grew colder, a soft white mist began to steal up from the ground. He watched it absently, his thoughts being occupied settling little points in his plan of action. His train of thought, however, was disturbed by his noticing that the mist was particularly thick at the west end of the chapel, by the ruined doorway. That in itself was not of much account, but as he looked, it appeared to glow with a white luminous light. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, in order to make sure that it was not an optical illusion, and when he looked again it had gone. He smiled to himself—experience had taught him that if one looks long enough at an object, a band of light will appear around it. He had known people sitting for clairvoyance delude themselves in that way, by thinking they could see the astral lights.

The darkness was now rapidly gathering, causing the outlines of the ruins to fast disappear, and as it closed around him, Mr. Canning could not help feeling a little uncomfortable. Further, the peculiar silence of the place made him sharply conscious; and once or twice he smiled grimly, as the idea would

come into his head that someone was behind him. He had been in a graveyard at midnight, for a wager, years ago, and he recalled the fact to mind that he did not feel at all uncomfortable; and yet, standing here, he could not say the same. There was a something which seemed to have got into his blood, and was trying to undermine his courage. To a less self-reliant man, that intimation would have been sufficient, he would have cleared out; but Mr. Canning was there on business, and the more the feeling grew, the more he mentally gripped himself with the determination of his rugged personality. Whatever was there, it would have to fight him.

Just then his attention was again drawn to the mist at the other end of the chapel, and this time he was bound to admit even to himself that the luminous glow was a fact. Moreover, he was aware that it was undergoing some sort of an evolution. Slowly, it began to expand, and—he could hardly believe his own eyes—out of it the shadowy form of a human being appeared.

It could not have taken more than half a minute, and he had only just time to take a mental note of the vision, when it suddenly disappeared, leaving a dull blackness.

He drew a deep breath, and his hand was wandering mechanically to his hip-pocket for his revolver, when a deep voice whispered almost in his ear:

"If you value your life, come with me!"

That he was startled goes without saying, but he gave no sign, except that his teeth shut with a

vicious snap. No detective likes to be caught napping. He did not even turn round to see who had spoken to him; instead, he coolly remarked, as if he were quite aware of another's presence:

"And the danger?"

"Will be apparent before very long," answered the voice.

Canning now turned easily, to meet the tall figure of a Hindoo, whom he could just see in the twilight; and his quick brain at once put him down to be the body servant of the Master of Storton, in which surmise he was right.

Agar Halfi looked at him with a faint glitter of interest in his eyes. This was no ordinary man, who did not even jump when an unexpected voice spoke in his ear. And what was he doing in the priory at that time? Sunset!

On his part, Canning was thinking that he had not made a mistake, he had expected the Hindoo. So far so good, but where was his master? If only he had known, that was just what Agar Halfi wanted to know!

While these thoughts ran quickly through his mind, he was mechanically taking stock of the Oriental, and he came to the conclusion that he was not altogether what he appeared to be. There was something about his presence not possessed by the average man, which commanded respect, and as he came to this conclusion, Mr. Canning's interest in this mysterious affair began to grow. There was probably more in it than appeared on the surface. Still, he could ponder over such things another time, now he must act.

In a leisurely voice he asked :

" If I choose to stay, my friend, what—— ? "

" You will die," was the abrupt answer.

The detective laughed easily, as he replied :

" I only have your word for that. Perhaps you will inform me what I have to fear, and then——"

As if in direct reply to his question, a long, low, plaintive cry broke on the still air, ending in a hideous, mocking laugh, half screech, which made his blood turn cold.

Never before in all his years had he ever heard anything to equal it, and he had vigorously to use his will in order to control himself. During the silence which followed, he stared hard at his companion, who did not seem to be in any way disturbed.

Agar Halfi ended the tension by remarking in a low voice :

" Come, there is no time to lose."

The detective followed him automatically, as though he had not complete command of himself, and silently and quickly the Hindoo made for the door in the wall. They had barely got outside it, when once more that unearthly cry smote their ears. They both stopped, as if compelled to listen, and Canning felt it penetrate into every fibre of his body. He must have stood thus for nearly half a minute, like one under a spell, hardly breathing, and with his arms hanging limp at his sides. Then with a great effort he mastered himself, and his natural fighting instincts began to rise.

Simultaneously it struck him as very curious that the other man did not seem to be affected, which at

once led him to a conclusion. It was a ruse! The Hindoo and his master wanted to get him out of the priory, he was in their way.

He cursed under his breath at not having thought of it before, and then, just as Agar Halfi was again moving, he exclaimed in a steely voice:

"Stop!"

The Hindoo turned quickly, to find himself facing the muzzle of a revolver, but beyond raising his eyebrows with a surprised expression, he did not move.

"Tell me," said the detective in a tranquil manner, "who is the owner of that beastly voice?" and he shivered slightly as he thought of it.

Agar Halfi's eyes glinted dangerously, as he answered contemptuously: "Are you mad?"

"No, the madness, if any, is on your part. Once more, tell me who is in that place?"

A startled look came into the Oriental's eyes, as he replied:

"Look behind you!"

Canning laughed sardonically.

"Rubbish, my friend, I'm not to be caught with schoolboy tricks."

"Look, I say," persisted the other.

For reply, the detective strode up to the Hindoo, and, going behind him, looked over his shoulder in the direction indicated. Then, for one of the very few times in his life, he felt afraid.

Framed in the doorway in the wall were two eyes that gazed at him malignantly. But such orbs; he had never seen anything like

them before, nor in all probability would again. In colour they were of a pale reddish hue, and they glowered with the cruellest expression imaginable.

Fascinated with fear, he returned that dreadful stare, with all the loathing and hate in his body, and then, he knew not how or why, he felt he was slowly being drawn toward the doorway against his will. He fought with all his strength, but unavailingly. Three steps he took in that direction, and then Agar Halfi's arm barred the way.

"No further, on your life!" he said in a low stern voice.

Canning's first impulse was one of fury at the Hindoo's obstruction, and he was just going to attempt to force his way past the impeding arm, when his eyes met those of the other man, and under the influence of that calm, steady gaze his rage died down, and he practically returned to his normal state.

Simultaneously, those terrible eyes blazed luridly with hellish rage, and once again that awful cry rang out, this time dying away in a chuckle of baffled fury.

On an impulse, the detective raised his revolver, and fired—once, twice, and as the smoke cleared away, he exclaimed in an unsteady voice:

"By heaven! if there is anything there flesh and blood, I've hit it; I could not very well miss at this distance. Let's go and see," and he started off to the doorway, followed by Agar Halfi, who remained silent. But not a sign of anything could

they find, and Canning looked perplexed; he could not understand, and went over the ground again and again with his electric torch. At last his companion remarked grimly:

"Come, you can do no good now. It is not flesh and blood that you have been combating."

For a moment the other stood in thought, and then, without a word he followed the Hindoo down the drive, out into the road. Here Agar Halfi stopped, and waving his arm in the direction of the village, said curtly:

"My way is this."

"And mine," answered Canning deliberately, pointing in the opposite direction, "is that."

Without another word, the Hindoo turned on his heel and started off on his way. For a moment the other man stared at him interestedly, and then suddenly he went after the receding figure, and overtaking the man before he had gone a hundred yards, said:

"I've forgotten something, my friend."

Agar Halfi turned questioningly, and as they faced each other, the detective continued:

"You probably saved my life just now," and held out his hand.

A smile came over the Oriental's dark face, as he grasped the other's fingers.

"It is nothing," he answered quietly. "Some day you may save mine; who knows?"

"Ah! one never knows," replied Canning. "If ever I can—" But Agar Halfi had disappeared in the darkness, and the rest of the sentence remained unspoken.

For a time the detective stood thinking, and then with a sigh he discarded his disguise, and carefully put the different articles into his pockets. Then, whistling softly to himself, he slowly made his way to Myrtle Cottage.

CHAPTER XVI

A PROBLEM TO UNRAVEL

WITH rapid strides, Agar Halfi made his way to the Manor. As he walked, he thought long and seriously; forgotten for the time was his queer meeting in the priory with the stranger. That no doubt he would recall later on, but at the moment something of far greater importance occupied his mind.

The phenomenon he had seen when standing behind the other man in the ruins, had probably given him a key with which he would be able to unlock the mystery which had been baffling them so long.

Reaching the Manor, he went straight to Brentwood's study, but found the door of the bedroom which led to it, locked, and the place in darkness. He listened for a while, but no sound reached his ear, so descending, he inquired of Mrs. Breton, the housekeeper, if the master was in.

That lady was busy checking accounts in her sitting-room. She raised her sharp grey eyes in surprise at the Hindoo's question; it was so very unusual for him to inquire after Mr. Brentwood; generally he knew all his movements, in fact, if any of the household wanted to know the master's whereabouts, they always went to Agar Halfi to find out.

"Well," she said, "the master went out at half-

past six, and left word that he would not be home till late, and that I was not to prepare anything for him."

"I suppose you have no idea where he went?"

"Not the slightest. All I know is, that he was dressed as if he were going to walk."

The Hindoo stared at a picture on the wall opposite, while he thought, and Mrs. Breton turned her attention to the column of figures she had been adding, when interrupted by her visitor. She checked it again carefully, and, satisfied that it was correct, turned her head inquiringly.

She looked at the dark, stern face with a wry expression. In spite of her fifty years, grey hair, and long service at the Manor, she had never been able to quite understand the relationship that existed between her master and his Eastern servant. They were more friends than anything else, and as she knew, spent much of their time together.

Still, being a practical woman, she had not allowed that to trouble her, though she was well aware that other members of the household were very jealous of the Hindoo. But Agar Halfi had never in any way interfered with her, indeed, had always shown her the utmost courtesy, and the fact that he had liberties which others did not possess, was, after all, Mr. Brentwood's business.

"Did he leave any instructions for me?"

"Not a word," she answered quickly.

He nodded solemnly, and after a few casual remarks, departed to his lodge. Passing through the living room, he went upstairs to his sleeping apartment, and taking a key from his pocket, opened the

door of an inner room, the threshold of which none but he and the Master of Storton had ever crossed.

It lay east and west, with a window on either side; and was the chamber wherein the Hindoo practised the occult arts. But it was as unlike the general idea of a magician's sanctum as could be imagined. The floor was polished with beeswax, and in the centre was covered by an Indian carpet about three feet square. The north and south walls were draped from ceiling to floor with dark tapestry, that on the south wall being divided where it covered the door which gave communication to the bedroom, and the windows were heavily curtained with the same material. On each side of the west window was a fantastic cabinet, on either side the east window, a copper brazier, supported on a tripod. Under the west window was the only sitting accommodation the room contained, in the shape of a long, low settee; while under the east window stood a curiously inlaid Indian table, which had on it a large cross of pure gold.

Carefully closing the door behind him, Agar Halfi switched on the electric light, and drew the curtains across the windows. The electrolier which gave light to the room was fixed in the ceiling, and covered by an opaque bowl. This had the effect of throwing the rays upward, thus imparting a soft, clear, and even light to the whole of the room.

For a moment he stood hesitating. Where was the Sahib? That was what he did not know, but was determined to find out. One way he knew of seemed pretty certain to bring about the desired result, but he was not sure that it was wise to

take it. At last he passed back into the bedroom, and in a few minutes appeared clothed in a white robe which covered him from head to foot. Going to the cabinet on the right-hand side of the window, he took therefrom a pair of balances and a large metal jar. Out of the latter he took some reddish-brown powder, which he carefully weighed. That done, he put the balances and the jar back into the cabinet, not forgetting to lock it. Then, taking one of the copper braziers from its stand, he put it on the carpet, and kneeling down, began to chant in a low voice, with his hands held palms downward over the vessel. For several minutes he continued thus, and then there suddenly shot out of the brazier a thin, transparent flame. Picking up the powder which was by his side, the Hindoo emptied it into the vessel, and there issued forth a dense smoke which gradually filled the room. When it had dispersed, he was lying motionless, stretched full length on the carpet, his hands folded on his chest, a look of calm sleep on his dark, finely-moulded features.

For nearly three hours he remained in this state, and it wanted but a quarter of an hour to midnight when he regained external consciousness. Opening his eyes, he raised himself to a sitting position and listened. It was raining, he could hear the drops beating on the windows; and a night wind had risen, which moaned fitfully round the house. He rose slowly, walked a few steps, then stood listening again. This time it was a doleful whimpering by the door. He went and opened it, and Hector fawned at his feet.

Agar Halfi looked at the dog with a smile, then patted his great head.

"Ah, my friend, you can come with me."

Hector wagged his tail, as though understanding.

"Now lie down, while I dress."

Obedient to the Hindoo's voice, the animal crept under a chair, and lay watching the man, who, with a frown on his brow, mechanically put on his everyday garments. He had not been successful in his experiment; no trace could he find of the Master of Storton. The failure to do so perplexed him. Try as he would, there always seemed to be something which was just too strong for him to overcome.

He had a growing conviction that Brentwood was in some way involved in this mystery, yet there was no tangible clue upon which he could act.

"Ah!" he muttered, "it is Fate." Then, with a quick movement, he went and unlocked one of the drawers in the left-hand cabinet in the inner room, and took from it two keys on a ring. They were duplicates of those which belonged to Brentwood's bedroom and study. Donning an ulster, he beckoned to the dog, and went downstairs. Passing out of the lodge, he quietly closed the sitting-room door behind him and made his way to a private entrance into the Manor, to which only the Master of Storton and he had access. Opening the door, he called Hector after him, and together they ascended a narrow stairway which led straight to the top of the building. At the end of the staircase was another door, which the Hindoo opened, and they emerged on to the landing of the

general stairway of the house. Directly opposite was the door of Brentwood's bedroom. Silently Agar Halfi turned the handle, and was satisfied to find it locked. He listened intently, but no sound fell on his ear except the falling of the rain and the mournful wail of the wind. Just then a great clock in the lower hall chimed twelve. He smiled oddly as he thought of the time, and without more ado unlocked the bedroom door, Hector close at his heels, and switched on the light.

One glance showed him that the room was empty, though the bed gave every appearance of having been used. Silently closing the door, he without hesitation climbed the short stairway to the Tower study, unlocked that door, and again switched on the light. Here also, he met with a similar result, the room was vacant.

He looked keenly around, but everything appeared to be in order, even to the west window, which was always kept partly open. Then something happened which roused his curiosity. Hector, whom he had momentarily forgotten, growled somewhere behind him. Turning, he saw the dog in the doorway, with hair bristling and muzzle drawn up, looking with wrathful eyes apparently at nothing!

"Quiet!" he said in a low, determined voice. Then he called him softly, but instead of taking heed, the animal started to back, slowly, in the same manner that a cat will when its gaze is held, his great eyes fixed on the east window. Instinctively the Hindoo looked in that direction, and for the first time he noticed that the window was open.

A frown appeared on his face ; he felt quite sure it was shut when he first looked round the room, though he could not have sworn to it for a certainty. Still, that would not be the cause of the dog acting in this manner. Walking over to the casement, he looked out into the night and listened intently ; but only the sound of the elements and the rustling of the trees came to his ear.

Then he thought of the empty bed ! Where was the Sahib ? That was the dominating thought in his mind. It was fairly clear that if, as Mrs. Breton said, the Master of Storton had gone out at half-past six, he had returned, gone to bed, and gone out again ! The fact that the bed had evidently been slept in pointed to that. But such a procedure was incomprehensible.

Turning from the window, he looked at Hector, who was lying just outside the door with watchful eyes, his muzzle on his huge paws. For a time he eyed him grimly, then with a deep, sonorous laugh, switched off the light and went out, carefully locking both doors after him. Calling the dog, he drew from his pocket an electric torch, and went and made sure that every entrance to the Manor, except the private way by which he had gone in, was bolted as well as locked. Satisfied, he went out the way he had entered, commanded the dog to lie down outside the door, and walked quickly back to the lodge. There he got some tacks, a piece of thread, and a small hammer. Returning, he fixed one tack on the doorpost and another on the door, then deftly twined the piece of thread around them. That done, he called Hector and again returned to

his lodge. Locking himself in, he sent Hector to his corner underneath the cupboard in the sitting-room, and making a pillow of his ulster on the hearthrug, lay down and slept.

He was awakened by a low, fierce growl. In an instant he was on his feet, fully alert. Hector also was standing, looking savagely at the window, and Agar Halfi noticed that his attitude was similar to that which he had exhibited on the threshold of the study a few hours ago.

He had the door open in a twinkling, but not a visible sign of anything was there which could have caused the dog to show irritation. It was strange, the animal would not act in that manner without sufficient cause.

He noticed that the dawn was breaking, cold and misty. With a shiver, he went and put on his ulster. When he returned, it struck him that the mist looked particularly thick and dirty in one place, about a yard from the ground. As he looked he thought it moved, quite distinctly, from the general mass. Further inspection confirmed this; it was travelling rapidly away from him, and in the direction of the Manor. He followed it curiously with his eyes, until it seemed to stop under the east wall. He noticed now that it had a faint green tinge, and all at once he became deeply interested. Gradually it rose, higher and ever higher, until it must have been on a level with the Tower. Then suddenly it vanished, and in its place, the Hindoo found himself staring at the open east window of Brentwood's study. He gave a low exclamation; it looked just as if that particularly

thick portion of the mist had entered the window! He had, however, hardly recovered from his surprise when he stopped dead, with astonished eyes and clenched hands. For a moment he thought he must be dreaming, but as he continued to stare, he realised that it was no vision.

Standing at the open window of the tower study in his pyjamas was the Master of Storton, gazing with lack-lustre eyes at the sunrise. His hands gripped the casement on either side, and his bronzed handsome face, now ghastly in hue, was distorted with a look of intense suffering. Gradually the drawn features relaxed, a faint tinge of colour came into the cheeks, and slowly, so slowly that it seemed ages, the light crept into his eyes, and Brentwood's face resumed its normal expression. Then Agar Halfi saw him shiver violently and start back suddenly; the next moment the window was closed.

For fully a minute the Hindoo stood as though entranced. Then he suddenly remembered the thread on the private door. Without more ado, he crossed the intervening ground—he was barely a hundred yards away—and dropping on his knees, examined the thread which he had overnight fixed across the entrance. One glance was sufficient to show him that it was intact!

He rose from the ground with a curious smile, and folding his arms, nodded to Hector, who was standing disconsolately by, and said sardonically:

"Yes, beast, the Gods have set Agar Halfi a pretty problem to unravel. Twice over shall he repay the debt he owes to his beloved friend, if not more!"

Hector slowly wagged his tail at being thus addressed, and looked up at the Hindoo with solemn eyes.

"And what part are you going to take in the drama, stupid?"

The dog, encouraged by the man's voice, came close to him, and put his muzzle in his hand.

Agar Halfi looked at him with a quiet melancholy, and then stood for a time lost in thought, while the dog remained motionless, as though sharing his friend's mood.

At last the Hindoo roused himself, and drew in a deep breath.

"Come, soulless one, let's find a fire and some breakfast."

CHAPTER XVII

THE ABBESS

WHEN Canning arrived at Myrtle Cottage after his visit to the priory ruins, he opened the gate as though to pass in; then suddenly shut it again, and retracing his steps down the road, went to the post office, where he sent off a telegram in cypher. That done, he made his way to the village hostel, and sat there till nearly closing time, talking to the rustics.

About ten minutes to ten he took his departure, and went to Shepperton's rooms. Arthur Shepperton was eating his supper, so he invited the detective to join him, which he did to the extent of a crust of bread and cheese and a glass of ale.

Canning was silent for a time, and the young solicitor looked at him curiously, but did not disturb his meditations. At length the detective related what he had experienced an hour or two ago, omitting nothing.

Shepperton listened eagerly, and when he had finished, remarked:

"Well, what do you think now; am I not right?"

But the other shook his head.

"What!" exclaimed his host.

"I don't know yet; it is a queer case."

Shepperton looked disappointed, and relapsed into silence. At last he said:

"It is a pity that black villain saw you—he will know you again."

By way of reply, Canning drew forth his disguise, and putting it on the table, exclaimed:

"I don't think so."

"Ah, that's a good thing," said Shepperton in a relieved voice. Then he laughed, as he thought of the detective's ingenuity.

"Has it occurred to you that you were unable to find Miss Hobson's trail?"

Shepperton eyed him doubtfully as he replied:

"Well, what of it?"

Canning shook his head with a smile, then clearing his throat, remarked:

"It entered my mind to-night, as I was coming back from the priory, that it ought to be possible, with the glove you have in your possession, to find her dead or alive."

"We did try, as you know."

"Yes, but you discovered something else, and since then, I understand, no other effort has been made."

"No, that is true," said Shepperton. "What have you in your mind?"

"Well, I think we ought to follow it up," answered Canning.

"Very well, if you think it at all likely, I have no objection. I'm willing to do anything that may help to clear the thing up. What do you propose to do? use Brentwood's dog again?"

"No," answered the detective sharply. "I have telegraphed to London for one of my own dogs, and it should be here to-morrow evening, Thursday morning latest."

Whatever misgiving (if any) Shepperton might have had about the detective, he could not help appreciating the promptness with which he acted, when once he came to a conclusion.

"Excellent," he replied. "Let it be Thursday morning. I will meet you at the priory at——"

"Nine o'clock," interjected Canning.

For about half an hour they sat talking, and then, with a yawn, the detective rose, saying:

"I think I will get; I can do with an hour or two's sleep."

"Right," answered his host. "By the way, what do you propose doing to-morrow?"

"Well, I am a little uncertain as yet. Do you want me for anything in particular?"

"No," said the other indifferently.

"Very well, Mr. Shepperton, I will meet you at nine o'clock, Thursday morning."

With this remark Canning went, and returning to his rooms, sought his bed. There for a time he lay, thinking that although he had cracked many a hard nut, this one looked like proving to be not only the hardest, but the queerest case he had ever come across.

At half-past nine on the Thursday morning, Shepperton and Canning stood in the ruined priory, looking at each other; the former with a perplexed expression, the latter with a wry smile.

Twice had they given the dog the scent, and

twice had he done exactly the same as Hector had done some days ago.

"It is very extraordinary," said Shepperton, in puzzled tones, "but it seems to me to be right."

Canning shook his head as he replied:

"It is against all reason, my friend. There must be crossed trails."

"Well, it beats me," returned Shepperton; "what do you say?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that it was not his business to let anything beat him. Then moving, he said:

"Come, let us try some other spot."

"Where?"

"Anywhere round about." Saying which, Canning started the dog at various points. The other watched him make one or two fruitless efforts, then sat down on a piece of rock in an indifferent manner. He had practically lost hope in the venture. But the detective, in his dogged manner, went quietly about his work, first here, then there, and gradually got further away.

"Seems to me he might as well search for the proverbial needle," mused Shepperton, and, tired of watching, he turned his attention to the ruins. He may have sat there for five minutes, when he was attracted by a hail from his companion. With a yawn, he rose and sauntered over to him; and at once his interest returned, as he looked at the detective's face.

"What is it?" he said quickly.

Canning, who was standing about a hundred yards from their original starting-place, beckoned

the other to follow him, and together they forced their way through some bushes for a few yards. Here Canning stopped, and pointing to the ground said :

" What do you make of that ? "

Shepperton looked eagerly, then shook his head.

" I don't see anything," he exclaimed.

" Well," replied the detective, " there is—or more correctly speaking, was—a path here. If you will look closely, you will just see faint traces of it. Now watch the dog ! "

Straining at his leash, the animal made his way through the tangled undergrowth, until they came out upon the path which led to the north entrance. Here they stopped to take breath.

" What do you make of it ? " asked Shepperton easily.

" I think we may make a discovery," answered the other coolly. " Now, let's get on."

For fully an hour they made steady progress, the hound leading them along various roads until they came to a brook running across a lane, and here the dog seemed to be baffled. They halted uncertainly ; at last the detective said :

" We must cross the water."

They did so, and to Shepperton's relief, the dog immediately took up the scent again, and they went on for nearly another hour.

" Are you sure we are not following a will-o'-the-wisp ? "

Canning smiled as he replied :

" There is not much fear of that. The dog is following something tangible, you can depend upon it."

All at once a sharp turning brought them in view of a long, low house which lay back from the main road several yards, and was partly hidden by trees. For this place the dog made a straight course.

Shepperton lifted the latch of the outer gate with nervous fingers, and they passed through into a drive which led to the main entrance.

"What place is this?" queried Canning abruptly.

"It is known as the 'Châlet,' and is occupied, I believe, by some refugee nuns from France. Beyond that, I don't think anybody here could enlighten you."

"Well, we will soon find out," replied the detective, whereupon he rang the bell in a business-like manner. A clang somewhere at the rear of the premises followed, and shortly after the door was slowly opened part of the way, by an elderly woman in the garb of a nun. She cast suspicious eyes at the men, and then seeing the dog, quickly pushed the door until it remained open only about six inches. The two inquirers looked at each other, and laughed.

"You had better ask to see the Lady Superior, or whoever is in charge," suggested the detective. Shepperton nodded his acquiescence, and approaching the door, handed in his card, saying:

"Will you convey my apologies to the Lady Superior, and tell her that I should very much like to see her on a most important matter?"

By way of answer, the woman stretched her arm through the door, gingerly took the bit of ivory, and disappeared. However, they were not left standing long in suspense. She shortly returned

and said with a pronounced French accent that her ladyship would see Mr. Shepperton if his business were important. Then she opened the door sufficiently to let him pass through, all the while keeping a nervous eye on the dog, which Canning was holding back by its leash.

She conducted Shepperton to a sort of ante-room, which, though devoid of furniture with the exception of a few plain chairs and a long, low oak chest, was spotlessly clean, while the bare boards were polished to such an extent that he felt some compunction about walking on them with his heavy boots. But he hardly had time to think about that—he had indeed scarcely sat down, when her ladyship appeared, bringing with her a faint suggestion of perfume.

Shepperton rose immediately and bowed. She acknowledged the bow with a gentle inclination of her head, then raising her eyes stood waiting for him to speak. For several moments the man stood in silence. There was something about the woman's face which made him feel ashamed of his sex. Never before had he seen such a beautifully spiritual countenance.

Barely forty, Héloïse Limonaire, daughter of the Vicomte d'Angiers, still retained some of that physical beauty with which nature had endowed her, and which had in part caused her to take the veil twenty years ago. Time, however, and the strict rules of a convent life had emaciated her figure, though her face had gained in sweetness ; and that strange fire, which only comes to those who conquer the flesh, shone with a pure light from her deep brown eyes. Driven from her native country, she

had sought a refuge in that land to which all refugees fly, and for two years she had lived quietly in this old country house, which her private means had enabled her to purchase.

"I d—o trust you will excuse this intrusion," began Shepperton. "The business which brings me here is in connection with the disappearance some weeks ago of Miss Elsie Hobson, from Worlstoke, of which mystery you have no doubt heard?"

Madame Limonaire shook her head as she replied:

"I'm afraid, Monsieur, that I have not heard of it."

He looked surprised, so she added by way of explanation:

"You see, we have so little to do with the outer world. But if I can assist you in any way, I will do so."

Her sweet, sympathetic voice encouraged Shepperton, and he rejoined:

"It is very kind of you to offer help, Madame—let me explain:

"Some weeks ago, Miss Hobson, to whom I am engaged—disappeared; and no trace of her could be found. Sometime after that, one of her gloves was found in the old ruined priory of Melsea."

Héloïse Limonaire nodded encouragingly, so he continued:

"To-day, by the aid of a bloodhound, we have traced her as far as this house, and—" he paused, and gave a short laugh, then went on: "Well, that is all, Madame."

For some time she looked him fully in the face, and to the man it seemed as if she were reading

what was in his mind. Then she gave a sigh, and replied :

" Can Monsieur describe the lady ? "

" Oh yes. She is twenty-four years of age, medium height, dark brown hair, brown eyes, dark skin, fairly robust in figure, good teeth rather prominent, one of them missing."

She nodded again, and after a pause remarked :

" Have you strong nerves, Monsieur ? "

He looked at her a little surprisedly, as he replied :

" Well, I think they are pretty sound. Why ? "

" Will you please come with me ? "

He followed her out of the room, down the hall into another chamber. There, she beckoned him to a large French window, which looked out on a grand old lawn.

" Look ! " she said.

The next moment he gave a cry, his face went white, and he clutched desperately at the casement for support. He could hardly believe his eyes, and for a space stood looking bewilderedly at the figure of Elsie Hobson, seated in a chair on the lawn.

" Is it true ? " he asked mechanically.

Héloïse Limonaire's eyes were moist, as she answered compassionately :

" Yes, Monsieur, it is true, Sit down and I will tell you all about it."

Shepperton sank into a chair, and she began :

" On the night of the 4th of April, about ten o'clock, I felt compelled to go to the main entrance of the house. Such impressions never mislead me, and through them I have several times been able to succour people in distress. This was no exception ;

I had hardly opened the door, when a low moan, almost at my feet, drew my attention. Lying on the steps in an exhausted condition was a young woman. I immediately called assistance, and we got her into the house. She seemed, poor child, almost demented with terror, and kept on crying out to us to save her, while she continually put her hands to her throat, around which was a little gold cross suspended on a chain of the same material. Well, toward dawn the next morning she suddenly passed into a coma or trance, and remained so for over five weeks, until four days ago, when she as suddenly awoke. But, Monsieur, I am afraid she has lost her memory"—then added quickly, as she saw his colour go: "Of course that may only be a temporary matter."

"I hardly know how to thank you for what you have done," he said in a strained voice.

"No thanks are needed, Monsieur, except to Him who has the direction of all things. I have only done my duty. Wait, and I will fetch Miss ——"

"Hobson," said Shepperton, filling in the name.

The Lady Superior opened the window, and the man watched her cross the lawn to where Elsie sat, and take her arm.

In a few minutes they had returned, and Shepperton's pulse quickened as he stepped forward and took his fiancée's hand.

"Elsie, don't you know me?"

She looked at him strangely, and smiling pathetically, turned to Madame Limonaire, as though for an explanation.

"The gentleman has called to see you, my

child. He says he knows you; don't you recognise him?"

"No!" she answered, with a perplexed look. "I don't think I have met him before."

His heart sank; she did not know him; but after all she was alive, and there was hope. His spirits revived somewhat, as the brighter side of things presented itself to his mind.

"Well, with your permission, Madame, I will depart for the present, and if I may impose upon your goodness for a little longer, perhaps you will care for Miss Hobson until I can make suitable arrangements for her to be fetched."

"By all means let her stay here as long as you wish."

Shepperton thanked her, then added:

"I think I will consult Miss Alletson, the Vicar of Worlstoke's sister, who is a friend of mine. I don't doubt that she will be willing to fetch Miss Hobson, when we have broken the news to her parents."

When Shepperton got outside, Canning was sitting on the steps smoking. He at once noticed by the other man's face that something extraordinary had happened. However, he did not speak, but waited for Shepperton to explain.

"She is there!" he said in a low voice, pointing to the house.

"Good," answered the detective coolly.

"Come," said Shepperton; "we can do nothing more at present."

As they walked along, he related what had taken place. Canning listened without inter-

rupting, until he had finished. Then he said cheerfully:

"Well, Mr. Shepperton, you must hope for the best; it will not be the first case of the kind that has been cured, by any means."

"I hope not," was the spiritless reply.

They walked in silence for a long time, and then the detective remarked:

"It's a good job I sent for the dog, eh?"

"Yes; but for that, goodness only knows when we should have found her. I am grateful, Mr. Canning, for your help."

"Ah," he answered reflectively, "and now we have got to lay hold of the criminal, which I don't think will be so easy!"

"Don't you really think so?" rejoined the other, in surprised tones.

"No; there is something in this case which even I don't understand, with all my experience."

CHAPTER XVIII

FATE DEFIED

MR. BRENTWOOD sat staring indifferently at a lengthy letter that lay on his study table. It was from a well-known F.R.S., with whom he had some little time ago witnessed one or two experiments in trance clairvoyance. The results had been good, and were the more satisfactory, as the medium was an amateur. Indeed, so strongly had the professor been impressed that he had written the Master of Storton the letter which now lay before him, asking if he would be willing to co-operate in a series of experiments, with a view to obtaining reliable evidence.

Curiously enough, Brentwood did not feel flattered, he was not keen upon providing laboriously compiled academic proofs for the academic use of the privileged few. In his heart he felt that the time would be largely wasted. Such proofs as might be forthcoming would not be understood by the general public, because the testimony would not be what is called scientifically demonstrable.

No, let the learned gentleman experiment and find out for himself. That was the way in which he had acquired knowledge; in fact, it is the only way in which anyone can hope to learn any of the inner truths of existence.

Really, at the moment he did not want to be

bothered about such matters, something else was uppermost in his mind. He thought he had discovered a weakness in himself, and he wanted to quash it—even the most well-balanced minds make mistakes.

The fact that Constance Alletson suspected him in regard to the Worlstoke mystery disturbed him. He did not know why it should do so, and because he could find no rational reason for it, he was annoyed.

Others suspected him of the crimes, and he was quite indifferent. Why should one woman's opinion give him a sensation of being hurt? To his cold experienced mind it was ridiculous; but the fact was there to be faced, and he could not brush it aside.

Why? Why? He asked himself the question several times, but no answer came to his mind.

"Absurd!" he said half aloud, and jumping up, started to pace the room with slight irritation. Then he thought of the reproach and pain which had shown in her eyes when he had called that afternoon at the Vicarage. It was obvious that the feeling of reproach was against the evil she believed he had wrought; but what caused the pain? Could it possibly be that she was hurt in a personal way, because she thought he had committed a crime?

"Rubbish!" he said aloud. Picking up at random a book, he lighted his pipe, and flung himself on the couch to pass an hour away, reading.

But Fate was paying particular attention to him this morning, and it was not going to let him rest as he wished.

"Even the dog won't come near me," he

thought, as he opened the book. It happened to be a volume of Tennyson's Poems, and he opened it haphazard. The poem was "Maud," and as he glanced at the open page, he read:

"Oh let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet,
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet;
Then let come what come may,
What matter if I go mad?
I shall have had my day."

He looked absently out of the window as he thought over the words, and smiled slightly as it occurred to him that the verse represented a passionate appeal to the gods of a lad about twenty-five, to let him know what love was before he died.

At that age he might have held the same sentiment; but he was nearly forty now, and, so far as he knew, the eternal passion which is talked about did not exist. To his mind, all manifestations of so-called love simply sprang from the sex instinct.

He turned one or two pages carelessly, and read again:

"She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet
And blossom in purple and red."

"Umph!" he exclaimed; "Tennyson seemed to have the idea of the eternal, as applied to individuals,

very deeply implanted. Those lines are good; their hidden meaning is eternal love. They express a beautiful ideal—if it were only true."

He mused abstractedly, and wondered what sort of a difference it would make to people's lives, if they could all realise and find such an ideal? But then, he thought sadly, "Man never lives up to what he truly believes is right."

"It is true!"

He opened his half-closed eyes with a jerk, and stared round the room. The words rang so clearly in his ear that he felt they must have been spoken by a human voice; then he laughed quietly; of course, no one was there.

"If it is true, it is true," he said to himself idly. From that, his thoughts drifted into a fresh channel. It occurred to him that he was rather a lonely man; that, with the exception of Agar Halfi, nobody knew him well; that, outside his work, life was dull and uninteresting; that——

He paused involuntarily; such a train of imaginings was not healthy, it might lead to a breakdown, and that would never do.

It was of course natural, he thought, that women should play the most important part in men's lives, and vice versa. But that was a general statement, and there are always exceptions. He had never felt the need of the opposite sex in the ideal sense expressed by the poets and other writers, during his existence. True, he had at times been attracted by women, but cold reason had quickly suggested to him that such fancies arose from the natural law, and he had rigorously suppressed them.

He was in his fortieth year, and, as he thought, he had not only mastered such things, but outgrown them. He had no doubt, too, that he owed his success in psychic research to his clear life. Some of the experiments he made took a tremendous lot of his strength, and there had to be a reserve, which in turn had to be built up somehow.

And then he came back to what he had originally been thinking about. He smiled. "For sure, all things travel in circles, even thoughts," he muttered. "Still, I cannot deny it, I really wish Constance Alletson did not suspect me. It hurts somehow——"

A low knock at the door interrupted him.

"Come in!" he said normally. It was one of the maids.

"The Vicar has called to see you, sir."

Brentwood's eyes expressed interest.

"Show him in, please."

"Phew! It is some time since he called; I am glad he has looked in."

When Alletson entered the room, Brentwood saw at once that something out of the ordinary had happened. His usually kind face was grave, and his eyes shone with suppressed excitement.

Rising, he extended his hand, and said—cordially for him—"I'm glad to see you, Alletson."

Beyond thanking him, the Vicar did not reply, but taking a chair, looked meditatively out of the window.

Brentwood looked at him curiously, then remarked:

"Well, what's happened? anything serious?"

An expression of surprise passed over the other's

face, and he glanced keenly at his host before he replied:

"I have some news which may be pleasing to you."

"Why may be?" was the query.

The Vicar laughed a short, spiritless laugh, then said:

"I will tell you. Elsie Hobson has been found! She is now at the Vicarage." The Master of Storton looked at him blankly, and the Vicar met his gaze steadily. Like most men of his temperament, he was not a coward, and when his sense of justice caused him to do an unpleasant thing, he never hesitated. However, nothing in the features of his host gave any sign of dismay. He did not even start perceptibly, and it would have been hard for any man to have quite hidden his emotions at such news, if he happened to be guilty.

"That's satisfactory, even to me, Alletson. Tell me all about it."

The Vicar related in detail how she had been traced, then added:

"Constance went and brought her away, poor girl, and for the present she is going to stay at the Vicarage, if her parents agree. She will want someone to look after her, and Constance has offered to do it."

"It is generous of your sister. By the way, Alletson, cannot I be of any use here? I have dealt successfully with one or two similar cases, and, if I may say so, where ordinary medical advice has completely failed. I should be happy to help if I could."

A troubled look entered the other's eyes, as he answered:

"I am sorry to say so, Brentwood, but it is not possible!"

"Indeed!" was the rejoinder. "How is that?"

The Vicar breathed deeply, and was silent for a time. When he answered, it was as if he had to force the words:

"They suspect you, Brentwood!"

The Master of Storton's face assumed a hard expression, but it was transient. He laughed ironically, and replied:

"I'm aware of that, Alletson—at least that your sister does."

The Vicar winced a little.

"They all do, Brentwood."

The Master of Storton slowly filled his pipe, while the other watched him. When he had finished, he turned his dark eyes fully on Alletson, and said coldly:

"Well?"

The Vicar half rose in his chair.

"There is no 'well' about it, Brentwood," he returned with emotion. "Whatever others may think, I don't suspect you; never did; never shall. I cannot think you capable of such things.

Brentwood turned his eyes away, and his face softened.

"It is nice to hear you say that, Alletson. I—I thought I only had one friend, and that he was a Hindoo, named Agar Halfi."

"Well, it is not so, you can depend on that," rejoined the other.

"I thank you for your confidence in me, Alletson. You are quite right, I could not perpetrate such crimes as those of which I am suspected."

There was a slight pause, and then he continued:

"I suppose Miss Alletson has told you why she suspects me?"

"Yes."

"Do others suspect me for the same reason?"

"No, they have other grounds!"

Brentwood, who was half lying on the couch, sat up and stared at his guest with a surprised smile.

"Other grounds!" he repeated. "I must confess I am a little astonished. I am quite at a loss to understand what other tangible reasons there could be. Do you?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you, Brentwood. You see, the others have confided in me, and I am almost bound in honour not to speak."

"Do not distress yourself, Alletson," replied the other quickly, "I quite understand. By the way, now you are here, and as things have turned out so curiously, I will show you something which may be of interest."

Rising, he went to his desk, and unlocking it, took out a photograph of the footprints, the copy of which he had lost. Handing it to the Vicar, he said:

"Have you seen anything like that before?"

Alletson gave one glance at it, and a troubled look spread over his face.

"Brentwood!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Why have you shown me this?"

Intuitively, the Master of Storton noticed immediately that the photograph caused his friend undue excitement, but avoiding the question asked him, he replied :

" Five years ago, when in Afghanistan, I heard of a strange, mysterious death, that at certain periods terrorized the populace of a particular district ; so I set forth to investigate it. The place where it was supposed to be was not many miles out of my way— I was then journeying toward the Persian border— and I easily found it. We camped overnight, not far from the cave which it was said to haunt, with the intention of commencing operations the next day. However, we were not fated to go and seek this evil, it sought us. It attacked me, just before the dawn, and I narrowly escaped with my life. For nearly six weeks I lay in a deep trance, during which time I remembered nothing. When I recovered, which was quite suddenly, Agar Halfi told me what had happened, and produced a photograph of those footmarks, which he had had the forethought to take. That which you have in your hands is the original, the copy I lost a few weeks ago."

The Vicar, who had not missed a single word of his host's narrative, gazed at him with astonished eyes for some little time, while Brentwood smiled back at him amusedly. At last, finding his tongue, he exclaimed :

" Why, that trance seems to tally with what Elsie Hobson experienced."

" With the exception that I did not suffer from loss of memory, and—" here the Master of Storton loosened his collar, and exposed to his friend

a jagged white seam on his throat, about two and a half inches long. "Elsie Hobson hasn't that."

The Vicar uttered an exclamation.

"Why, that scar is the same as the one which was found on poor Thornton's body!"

Brentwood nodded grimly. Then said:

"Now what do you think of this. The night we were encamped outside that cave in Afghanistan, and before we settled down to sleep, Agar Halfi told me the following."

Here he related to the Vicar the Legend of the Mountains.

"It is all very strange, Brentwood, yet I should be more inclined to believe that the Legend was invented to tally with the deaths. Still, what you have told me confirms what I fully believed in my heart, that——"

"That the others who found the copy of that photograph, and on it based their suspicions that I am the culprit, made a slight mistake, eh?" interrupted the Master of Storton.

For a moment Alletson looked confused, then the frank generous nature of the man asserting itself, he said:

"You have hit it; that is so."

"It was to get at that point I showed you the photograph. When you told me that others suspected me as well as your sister, but on quite different grounds, it occurred to me at once that the lost photograph must be the cause. You see, the initials "H. A. B." endorsed, would inform the finder to whom it belonged."

The Vicar laughed cheerfully, as if a weight had been taken off his mind.

"I'm so glad I came," he said, rising. "Now I will go and put matters right.

"Not quite right," returned his host, looking at him steadily. "What you now know will not prove me innocent to Miss Alletson."

The Vicar's face dropped. "Ah, I had forgotten. Still, that will no doubt clear itself all right," he said encouragingly. "Good-bye for the present."

Brentwood smiled doubtfully, as he shook hands.

"Let me know if I can be of any assistance with regard to Miss Hobson," he said finally as they parted at the door.

Going back to his study, Brentwood thrust his hands into his coat pockets, and stared hard at the table. "I suppose it is satisfactory," he thought, then he shook his head slowly, "but it won't affect her suspicions, and I'm afraid it is not in my power to dispose of them."

A knock at the door disturbed him, and the next moment Agar Halfi entered.

"Good!" exclaimed the Master of Storton; "I wanted to see you."

He related what had transpired at the Vicar's visit. The Hindoo smiled and nodded, but did not speak. Brentwood looked at him with a dry smile, the Oriental's quaint ways interested him.

"You see, I am in disgrace with the district, Agar Halfi."

The Hindoo shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, as though the matter were hardly worth discussing.

"Did you want me for anything?" asked Brentwood, after a pause.

"Yes, Sahib, Hector has disappeared again!"

The other laughed curiously. "Gone to the Vicarage?" he queried.

"Probably—shall I go and see?"

The Master of Storton knitted his brows for a moment, then replied:

"No! If he is there, let him stay, unless they ask for him to be fetched away. If he is anywhere else, he will turn up all right."

"Good," answered the Hindoo indifferently.

"Anything else?"

Agar Halfi folded his arms, and for a space stood in solemn silence, then he answered:

"To-day week the Sahib is forty years old."

"That is true, my friend. What of it? Do you want to buy me a present?"

"The Sahib does not need material presents," returned the other, without losing his dignified manner.

"Go on," said Brentwood, smiling.

"Do you know the aspects of your progressed horoscope on that date?"

"Yes, I think I do," was the careless reply.

"Sahib, they are evil, more evil than any I have seen in your nativity. I warn you to be careful. Neptune culminates, and the moon is at the full!"

Brentwood thought for a few minutes, then said:

"Thank you, Agar Halfi. I will be on my guard, and I take it that you have the matter in mind?"

The Hindoo nodded gravely as he replied, "I am keeping watch now, Sahib."

"And I will report my movements to you each day," said Brentwood, "so that you will know exactly where to find me."

"Ah," exclaimed the other approvingly, then said to himself—as though continuing the other's sentence—"all that you are aware of!"

"Now to return to the Worlstoke Mystery, Agar Halfi. What do you think of Miss Hobson's case? Don't you think we could restore her memory?"

The Hindoo's black eyes flashed as he replied:

"Maybe, Sahib, but Agar Halfi feels that until the evil which has caused the trouble is run to earth, the young lady's memory will not return."

"Still, it might be tried," continued Brentwood stubbornly.

"From what Mr. Alletson told you, there are difficulties in the way, Sahib."

"Yes, I know, but I thought perhaps you would take the matter in hand, if they were willing."

The Hindoo shook his head doubtfully.

"That is speculative; still, it could be suggested."

"Well then, I will write to the Vicar to-day, stating that I shall be pleased to take Miss Hobson's case in hand, and that if there is any objection, you will be willing to do so. If they refuse, well, no more can be said; we shall have done our best."

"Very good, Sahib."

CHAPTER XIX

HEART-SEARCHINGS

CONSTANCE woke with a start. For a time she lay in a slight perspiration, with that uncomfortable feeling of fear one has when waking suddenly out of a distasteful dream.

It was dark, so she closed her eyes instinctively, in order to shut out what might be there for her to see. As she gradually obtained control of her faculties, she chided herself for being a silly goose! Sitting up in bed, she reached the matches, and lighted a night lamp which she kept on a small table close by. That done, she lay back and listened intently, but no sound caught her ear, all was silent. Satisfied, she looked at her watch, and noted that it was five minutes to four o'clock, and very nearly daybreak. Then she turned her attention to her dream.

It had been a disagreeable one, but she waived that aside. If she were not very much mistaken, it was an important one! In character, it corresponded to that which she had before experienced, the one which resembled the dream Agar Halfi told her he had had. Settling herself comfortably down, she went over it in detail, so as to commit it thoroughly to memory.

Once again she had stood in that desolate wild mountainous region, waiting for she knew not what,

and her heart was filled with a strange fear. At last there appeared before her the same Hindoo priest who had manifested in her last dream. In his left hand he held a black wand, in his right a white one. The left half of his flowing robe was black, the right half white, and in his sombre eyes glowed the deep fire of the mystic.

Raising both wands above his head, he addressed her thus: "Child, you are one of the instruments of Fate in a strange tragedy. Upon you falls a burden, which is really the burden of others. Unless you faithfully carry out your part thereof, so surely shall you repent too late. I forewarn you that the secret of your own life will be revealed by your spirit to your mind, before the moon is on the wane, and if you take one false step, flinch once from your duty, your doom will be this"—here he pointed with the black wand to the number eighteen which appeared in figures of lurid fire—"and many weary cycles shall pass before once again the opportunity shall occur to enable you to advance in the mysterious evolution of eternal life. But if you are true to yourself, if you act fearlessly and unselfishly, all will go well, and the result will be this"—here he raised the white wand, and pointed to the number twenty-two, which glowed in figures of pure white light. "But I warn you, child, that your task is not an easy one. Remember that no success worth gaining is achieved without severe trials. When the secret of eternal life is revealed to you, do not hesitate to choose your path. There is only one right way. All humans are conscious of it, though not many realise that they should have trodden

it until too late, and then back must they come to the physical plane of existence, to again toil and struggle, until they shall conquer. This is the last time I can appear to you; already have I said more than I judge to be safe. Yet one thing more. In your left hand you will find imprinted the mystic Cross of St. Andrew, which means that you have the mystic power, though incipient. It must be developed, but alone you can accomplish little. A soul at present imprisoned in human clay, with the mystic Cross on his right hand, shall fulfil your destiny. And now farewell; when we meet again you will know who I am, for your eyes will by that time have been opened."

She watched his figure fade away. When he had almost disappeared, she heard his voice, warningly clear, " Remember, child, be true to yourself."

Satisfied that she had it clearly, Constance blew out the lamp and turned toward the window. A break in the darkness told her that the dawn was approaching. Closing her eyes, she tried to settle down, but it was quite light before she eventually fell asleep. Her active brain, once thoroughly awake, could not easily be controlled, and in the quiet darkness was even abnormally alert. First of all her mind drifted on to the mystery, and when she had successfully dispelled it, she began to think about the Master of Storton, and that train of thought held for a long time.

She still felt that he was guilty, yet somewhere deep down she knew she wished he was not. But why? The man was cold, reserved, and appeared to be selfish, practically interested in nothing but

his work. In spite of all this, there was one side of him—curiously enough a side she only dimly understood—which appeared to be noble, indeed, once or twice she had thought it something more than that. She did know for certain that it appealed to all that was best in her. What a pity there should be that other side to him. Ah, it was more than a pity, it was dreadful. Yes, she was sorry, really sorry. Then she went on to wonder how she could get at Agar Halfi, so that he could interpret her dream? And wondering, she slept.

The sun was shining brightly when, about two hours later, she was aroused by a loud bark, followed by what sounded like a stifled screech from Martha. Slipping out of bed, Constance donned her dressing-gown, and opening the window, looked out, then she laughed. Standing on the lawn, looking the essence of stubbornness, was Hector, gazing stolidly at Martha in the kitchen doorway, holding a broom with both hands. Hearing her mistress laugh, Martha looked up hurriedly and exclaimed:

"Please, Miss, that brute's here again. He must have jumped the wall at the bottom of the garden, and when I went to drive him away with this"—here she held up the broom—"he barked at me."

Constance laughed again, then said:

"Never mind, Martha; let him alone, and he won't hurt you. I'll see to him when I come down."

Turning her eyes to the dog, she called him by his name. Hector looked up quickly, and began to slowly wag his tail.

" Good old dog," she said coaxingly. He whimpered, and began pawing the lawn.

" Now lie down, sir ! " Hector obediently sat down on all-fours, his tail still moving to and fro.

" All right, Martha, I'll be down shortly." Saying which, she withdrew from the window and quickly commenced her toilet. When she had finished, she went to Elsie Hobson's room, the spare one next her own, and knocked quietly ; receiving no answer, she softly turned the handle, and opening the door, went in with a light tread. Elsie was sleeping peacefully, as though nothing in the world had ever troubled her. Poor girl, thought Constance sympathetically, as she softly withdrew, will she ever recover ?

During breakfast, which meal Constance and her brother took alone, Philip asked :

" What time is Mr. Shepperton coming ? "

" He said he would call about two o'clock with Mr. Canning," she replied ; then added uneasily, " I hope you have not to go out, Philip ? "

" Oh no," he assured her ; " I asked because I am anxious to meet them, Constance. I have something important to say."

" Indeed ! " she answered, surprised.

" Read this, my dear." He handed her a letter which had come by the morning's post from the Manor.

Constance opened her eyes as she mastered its contents, then looked at her brother inquiringly.

" He has soon got to hear about Elsie."

" I will explain," said the Vicar, with a grave smile. " Yesterday morning, I went to the Manor

and told Mr. Brentwood." As he was speaking, he watched her face contract, so he asked:

"Don't you approve, Constance?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what to say, Philip. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I'm very glad I went, because the result of the visit is, that I shall be able to clear my friend the Master of Storton from any suspicions that have been formulated against him in connection with the Worlstoke Mystery."

Constance unconsciously drew a deep breath.

"Can you really do that?" she asked eagerly.

Her brother could not help noticing her keen interest.

"Should you be glad if I could?"

For a moment she looked at her brother with a pained expression; she hardly liked his question; then she answered a little coldly, "Of course I should, Philip. Need you have asked?"

"I'm sorry, Constance, but I was not sure whether or not you were hostile toward him."

"No, indeed; why?"

"Well," he returned slowly, "to tell the truth, I rather thought you were, considering what you have experienced and suffered at his hands."

"Surely, Philip, you must know that I am not at all like that. I don't think I'm vindictive, I don't think I bear malice."

He did not answer, so she said after a pause:

"Tell me about your visit."

The Vicar related at length all that occurred, and she listened restlessly. At the end she exclaimed:

"I don't think for a moment that Mr. Shepperton

would agree to Mr. Brentwood having anything to do with Elsie, and I am doubtful as regards Mr Agar-Halfi."

"Quite so, Constance; but what do you, yourself, think?"

"Oh——" she laughed hopelessly, "after what I experienced, what can I think? I can only come to one conclusion!"

They finished their meal in silence, then Constance rose to ring the bell. Having done that, she turned to the window, but had hardly looked out when she exclaimed:

"Oh, I forgot, Philip, I've had a visitor this morning!" and she laughed.

"Visitor?"

"Yes—come and see."

He went to the window, and saw Hector basking in the sunshine on the lawn.

"Very extraordinary he should have taken such a liking to you."

"Isn't it!"

They surveyed him for a time, then turning briskly, Constance exclaimed: "Really, I must go and look after Elsie."

"And I must go and do some work," added Philip. "You will find me in my room, if I am not about when they call."

CHAPTER XX

THE DECISION OF THE "COMBINE"

WHEN she agreed to look after Elsie Hobson, Constance had taken upon herself a severe task. She found that the poor girl was practically helpless, and it had only been by painstaking efforts that she had been able to get her to do the most simple things.

As to her past life, she could not remember a single thing. She did not know anyone, not even her own name, and she went about in a mechanical sort of way, clinging to Constance like a child. At first it had been very distressing to see her like that, but sensibly realising the situation, Constance had devoted herself to her charge, and as far as it was possible, improvement in her condition had been made.

Elsie occupied her attention that morning for fully an hour, by which time it was nearly ten o'clock. She was, however, able to spend a short time with her charge on the lawn, before a ring at the front-door bell warned her that Mr. Shepperton and Mr. Canning had arrived.

Rising, she went quickly into the house, to find that Martha had shown them into the drawing-room. Shepperton introduced Mr. Canning to her, and that gentleman, bowing awkwardly, said that he hoped she was well.

Constance looked at him curiously, and wanted to laugh. He looked so uncongenial in her pretty room, sitting in a low fancy chair, with his long legs and great feet sprawling on the carpet. But almost the next moment she detected something in his appearance which commanded her respect. What it was she could not exactly define, she simply knew that she had realised he was a strong, reliable man.

"And how is Elsie this morning?" inquired Shepperton.

"Oh, about the same, I think. You had better come and see her."

Just then the Vicar entered, and after he had been introduced to the detective, Constance said:

"Come along, Mr. Shepperton, I will take you to Elsie, while Philip talks to Mr. Canning."

When they had gone, Alletson looked silently at the detective, who was apparently deeply interested in the design of a vase on the mantelpiece. The Vicar did not know what to think of him, he was such a queer-looking man. He was just about to address him, when, without turning his head, Mr. Canning exclaimed:

"I expect you have wondered what I think about this case, sir?"

Alletson smiled genially. "That is just what I was going to ask you, Mr. Canning."

The detective screwed up his thin lips, and sagely nodded his head.

"Well, officially speaking, the case would, I think, be reported as one 'that has baffled all efforts,' but personally"—here he turned quickly and looked steadily at the Vicar, as though to make

quite sure he was not on wrong ground—"I feel there is either a huge hoax being carried on, or else it is a genuine mystery, as far out of the reach of ordinary investigation as I am from being saved."

Alletson lifted his eyebrows in surprise at this very uncommon speech, then he laughed genuinely.

"I think, Mr. Canning, you have summed up the situation pretty accurately. But do you intend to deal with the matter officially or personally?"

"Both, sir. I am interested."

"I feel I must congratulate you on your success in finding Miss Hobson."

"As much a matter of luck, Mr. Alletson, as anything else," was the modest reply.

"If we could only get her memory restored, we might discover something."

"Perhaps," answered the detective, "but you never can tell."

At this juncture the other two returned, Constance with tears in her eyes, and Shepperton looking very dejected.

"Well?" asked the Vicar sympathetically.

Shepperton shook his head gloomily, as he replied:

"It seems quite hopeless; not a vestige of recognition has she shown in any way."

They were all silent for a space, then Mr. Canning remarked in his high-pitched voice:

"A case like this requires time, you cannot hope for quick results. Give it three months."

Shepperton smiled despairingly. "I suppose that is what it amounts to, and perhaps I had better

realise straight away that it will probably be a long job, even if she does recover."

"In that connection, I have something important to say," remarked the Vicar steadily. All eyes turned to him as he continued: "But first of all, I wish to speak with regard to the photograph which Mr. Shepperton found."

"Oh yes," answered that gentleman attentively.

"To get straight to the point, I called on the Master of Storton yesterday, partly to inform him of Miss Hobson's return. When I had finished, he produced a similar photograph to the one Mr. Shepperton found, and asked me if I had seen anything like it before. Of course I was surprised, but not half so much as I was when he told me the story of it." Here the Vicar related in detail what he had learned from Mr. Brentwood. Then he continued:

"Now I think that pretty well absolves the Master of Storton from any suspicions which may have been formed against him, so far as the photograph is concerned. What do you say, Mr. Shepperton?"

Thus addressed, the latter gave a short unsatisfied laugh, and answered:

"If what Mr. Brentwood told you is true, I don't see how we can come to any other conclusion."

"There is no doubt about the scar on his throat, and there is little doubt that it corresponds in shape to the wound found on the body of poor Thornton," replied Alletson with a little heat.

"Quite so," returned Shepperton. "What do you think, Canning?"

"I agree that it clears the gentleman from sus-

picion in a direct way, and, if what he says took place in Afghanistan can be verified, certainly from any suspicion as regards the photograph, but—" he paused, and they all looked at him inquiringly. It was Constance who put the question to him:

"How else could it affect him?"

The detective pursed his thin lips, and half-closed his eyes, before he replied:

"Has it not occurred to anyone that if Mr. Brentwood's story is true, he is indirectly the cause of this mysterious something coming to this district? It has never before been heard of in England!"

They stared blankly at the detective, then Shepperton slapped his thigh, and exclaimed:

"So simple, too, yet it never struck me."

"And," continued Canning, addressing the Vicar, "is it not probable that he never told you about this before, because he realised that you would come to such a conclusion?"

"Not necessarily so," rejoined the Vicar. "If the Master of Storton were conscious of the fact that he had unknowingly brought this evil to England, I do not see any possible reason why he should try to hide anything connected with it. The simple fact that he may have been instrumental in the matter does not make him guilty!"

"Your argument can be turned another way, reverend sir," replied the detective a little grimly. "The gentleman has on his own showing withheld certain important information, which tends to show that he does know he brought the evil to England, and that he is guilty in endeavouring to cover up his traces."

"Then why did he tell me yesterday about the photograph, if he intended to deceive us? Why did he not still keep silent?" answered Alletson a little triumphantly.

"What you say seems good enough, Mr. Alletson, but you must remember that this gentleman deliberately told you yesterday about the footprints, when he heard that Miss Hobson had been discovered, and suddenly realising that if Miss Hobson recovered her memory, the whole thing would come out, he did it with a view to change of plans."

Shepperton looked at the Vicar with a wry sort of smile, as much as to say, "Now then!"

"Just so," replied the Vicar quickly. "My answer to you is here, contained in this letter." He started to open it with nervous fingers, and was about to hand it to the detective, when Constance said in an undertone:

"You had better read it, Philip."

Her brother nodded, and began:

"'STORTON MANOR, STORTON,
May, 19—.

"'DEAR ALLETSON,—Further to our conversation this afternoon, either my friend Agar Halfi or myself would be very willing to deal with Miss Hobson's malady, and attempt to restore her memory, should it be agreeable to all.

"'I suggest this, partly because a lot of money may be wasted in useless advice, and partly because I know that there is only one reliable method of dealing with such cases, and that I learnt in the East.—Yours sincerely, H. A. BRENTWOOD.'"

"Now if your last surmise is correct, Mr. Canning, why should the Master of Storton write this letter, offering to help to bring about the very result that would be his undoing?"

"Simply that he has no intention of really trying to restore Elsie's memory, and would conduct some tom-fool experiment just to deceive us," blurted out Shepperton.

The Vicar's face flushed a little, but he restrained himself admirably, and for a time no one spoke. The silence was getting a little uncomfortable, when Constance remarked coldly:

"Don't you think we are straining the point somewhat?"

Her remark brought Canning's eyes to her face, and a sort of a smile wrinkled his countenance as he replied:

"Perhaps we are getting a little into the clouds. I think that your brother is justified in his argument, though of course there is the possibility of what has been said on the other side. But apart from both points of view, we have, I understand, a very serious piece of evidence from Miss Alletson, which is to my mind of great value in this particular case, in fact it comprises the only evidence we at present have against the Master of Storton; and on that alone—speaking professionally—I should be bound to watch the gentleman, until his innocence was proved beyond doubt."

"And it is because of that evidence, and what I have gone through, that I cannot recommend that Mr. Brentwood be allowed to deal with Elsie," exclaimed Constance, in a steady voice.

Shepperton gave her a grateful glance. "And I certainly should not care about it," he added.

"Have you thought that you may be throwing away the means of restoring Miss Hobson's memory?" ejaculated the Vicar.

"I have, Philip," replied Constance, "and because of that, I suggest that there could scarcely be any harm in allowing Mr. Agar Halfi to treat the case!"

"Really, Miss Alletson—" began Shepperton, but she interrupted him defiantly:

"Why not? If we are all there at the time, I don't see that any harm can be done."

With a sigh, he looked appealingly at the detective, who was coolly examining a piece of china which he had picked up from a small table at his elbow.

"Mr. Canning, please!" he exclaimed a little shortly.

Without looking up from what he was doing, the detective answered:

"The lady's reasoning is good, Mr. Shepperton."

Here he nearly lost his temper. In a sense he felt at bay; they were all three of an opinion contrary to his own, and he was mortified as well as angry.

"But I most emphatically protest!" he said heatedly.

No one answered his remark, and in his annoyance Shepperton felt ready to rush out of the room and never speak to any of them again. But it did not take him long to crush that impulse.

Things were again beginning to get painful, when the detective calmly said:

"Of course, Mr. Shepperton, you can try other

means of restoration, but I am bound to say that what Mr. Brentwood insinuated in his letter about waste of money is probably correct. Are you aware that cases of lost memory in the ordinary course of things have to right themselves, or not at all? Nobody seems to know how to deal with them. Judging from what Mr. Alletson told me a short time ago, it may be worth trying, provided conditions satisfactory to ourselves could be obtained."

"There is no doubt about their skill in these matters," exclaimed the Vicar.

Shepperton could hardly suppress a sneer as he said to himself, "No, there isn't!"

He did not like the idea at all, and fought against it for some time, but eventually the weight of the detective's reasoning influenced him, and he acquiesced, though reluctantly.

"Shall I make the arrangements, Mr. Shepperton?"

"Please, if you don't mind," returned the latter. "I hope sincerely that it will turn out a success, though I really cannot bring myself to think so."

"From what I know of Mr. Agar Halfi, I am sanguine of success," said Constance encouragingly.

"Thank you, Miss Alletson," he returned quickly, then added:

"Please do not think me ungrateful; nobody could have done, nor is doing, more for me than you and your brother, and I fully appre——"

"Don't," said Alletson warmly, putting his hand on the other's arm. "We quite understand."

They shook hands, and Constance and her brother

watched the two men go down the path, until they disappeared outside the gate.

Turning to her brother, she said in a low voice:

"I wonder what will be the end of all this?"

He shook his head gravely, as he replied:

"It is difficult to say, but I trust God will guide our actions, and lead us into clear waters." Saying which, he went slowly to his own room, and for several minutes stood looking out of the window across the garden. Then going to his desk, he sat down and wrote the following letter:

"THE VICARAGE, WORLSTOKE.
May 19—.

"DEAR BRENTWOOD,—It has been agreed to entrust Elsie Hobson's case to your Hindoo friend. If you will be so kind as to let me know when you can arrange for the experiment to take place, I will inform the others. So that there shall be no doubt about your presence (I, personally, should strongly object to your absence) I suggest that the place selected be the Manor. Please forgive the liberty I take; candidly, I think it best, and I know I can talk frankly to you.

"For your guidance, I had better say that there will be present from here: Mr. Shepperton; a friend of his, Mr. Canning; my sister Constance and myself; and of course there will be yourself, Mr. Agar Halfi, and Miss Hobson.

"With every earnest wish that things may soon straighten themselves out,—Believe me, your sincere friend, PHILIP ALLETSON."

After reading it over carefully, he addressed an envelope, and put the letter in it. He was about to seal it, when he hesitated, and taking the letter out, went to find Constance. She read it over twice and handed it back in silence. Then she gave vent to a queer little laugh.

"Won't it do?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh yes, Philip," she answered; "it is not that, but I can't help thinking that while we suspect Mr. Brentwood of such terrible things, it is a bit mean to make all the use of him we can. If he is innocent, I shall never be able to look him in the face, for very shame."

Her brother silently sealed the letter, he did not know what to answer—and taking a stamp from his pocket-book, fixed it on the envelope with a determined blow of his fist. At last he exclaimed:

"Constance, I know he is innocent!"

"Philip, I know he is not!"

They looked at each other almost defiantly, then they both smiled, and Constance impulsively kissed him, a thing which was not customary with her.

"We cannot afford to quarrel, Philip, even though we hold different opinions, but I wish I could think the same as you do!"

CHAPTER XXI

HOW EAST RULES WEST

It was just past two o'clock the next afternoon, when Constance—who was busy writing notices for a Church Workers' Committee—heard a motor stop outside the gate. Shortly afterwards, heavy footsteps resounded on the gravel path, and the next moment there was a ring at the bell.

She wondered who it could be—Mr. Brentwood? Hardly. Then who was it? Her unspoken question was answered by Martha opening the door and informing her that the dark gentleman from the Manor had called.

Constance was pleasantly surprised. Ever since the night of her dream she had been cogitating how she could get to see Agar Halfi, and now the problem had been solved for her by his unexpected call.

"Show him in, please," she said quickly.

Her blood pulsed a little faster while she waited. She remembered the last time he had called, how interesting had been their conversation, and she was conscious of a sense of satisfaction at meeting him again.

As he entered the room, Agar Halfi saluted her respectfully in his dignified way, and at her request slowly took a seat.

"I understand Mr. Alletson is out?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Constance, "and I do not expect

him back until late, that is, tea-time. Can I be of any assistance ? "

Why, she did not know ; but as soon as he had entered the room, Constance felt a soothing influence come over her, which had the effect of making her forget all the small worries of life. It was similar to the influence which was always with her brother, only in a much greater degree. It occurred to her as being a little curious, knowing that the Hindoo was not a Christian. She had always associated such power with the Church, and to find that it was present, and in a greater degree, in a non-Christian, set her thinking. Her quick brain immediately grasped that if this influence could be possessed by a non-Christian, her idea that it belonged to the Church was wrong. Then to what was it due ? She did not know that it was obtained by inward development of faculties of which the great majority of people are unconscious, and that in her brother's case, he had in a small degree unconsciously developed them, and in spite of the Church ! Then it struck her that at one time she had thought Mr. Brentwood possessed the same kind of power, and as she thought over it, she realised that he still possessed it, though her consciousness of it had been totally obscured by that other terrible symptom he exhibited.

" I think I can quite well transact my business with you, Miss Alletson," replied the Hindoo. " I have called in reply to the letter your brother wrote to Mr. Brentwood yesterday."

" Quite so," she answered ; " I am fully aware of its contents."

"Well," he continued, "Mr. Brentwood has left the matter in my hands entirely, and his house is at my disposal, any time I think fit."

"That is good of him," she exclaimed, then added: "And you—will you do it?"

The shadow of a grim smile crossed the Oriental's face as he said:

"Yes, I will, and I will only make one condition."

"And that?" queried Constance, holding her breath.

"Is that all the people who have been concerned in this case are present during the time I am carrying out my work."

She breathed again, and replied in a cheerful tone:

"I feel that I must thank you on behalf of Mr. Shepperton and my brother, and I do so most sincerely on my own account."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, and replied:

"I called in person, Miss Alletson, partly because it is simpler to make arrangements verbally than by letter, and partly because I wish, if I may, to see Miss Hobson, so that I shall know exactly how to prepare for the experiment."

"There is no difficulty about that—I will take you to her. She was asleep about half an hour ago, but may be awake now."

Elsie Hobson was reclining in an easy-chair in the breakfast-room, and opened her eyes at the sound of them entering. She sat up wonderingly, with a perplexed expression on her pretty face. Constance went to her, and said encouragingly:

" Elsie, this gentleman is going to make you better."

The girl turned her eyes to the Hindoo, who was standing just inside the door, with a softened expression on his usually set features, and looked at him earnestly ; then, as if satisfied with her scrutiny, she said to Constance in a puzzled tone :

" Why, I am not ill, am I ? "

" No, dear," replied Constance soothingly. " Not now, but you have lost your memory, and this gentleman is perhaps going to restore it."

" Oh, I see," she answered absently.

Agar Halfi advanced to her chair, and taking one of her listless hands in his, spoke to her gently. She looked at him simply, like a child, and as her eyes met his, he stopped speaking, holding her with his glance. Just for a second, she shrank as if frightened, then a flash of intelligence crossed her face, and she exclaimed eagerly :

" Yes, I know, I met you . . . in . . . " she paused, mystified, a look of disappointment on her countenance, and then continued wearily, " Oh, I cannot just remember where ! "

" Never mind," he said in a low voice, " you will later on. There is plenty of time."

She nodded as if satisfied, though her eyes never left his face. Agar Halfi gazed at her steadily for several minutes, while Constance watched with deep interest. Gradually Elsie's eyes seemed to glaze, a film appeared over the dark pupils, then, with a restful sigh, she closed her eyes, and sank back in her chair as though in a peaceful sleep.

"She is in the hypnotic sleep," explained the Hindoo, "from which she will awake in an hour. Keep her as quiet as possible during the next two days, please, and do not let her eat any meat, nor take any stimulant."

"I understand," replied Constance, "and will carry out your instructions. What day have you fixed for the experiment?"

"Friday evening, at seven o'clock; that is, the third day from now, Tuesday."

"Very well. Now will you please come back to the drawing-room, there is something about which I want to ask you before you go?"

With a last look at the sleeping girl, he rose and followed Miss Alletson out. When they were again seated, she looked straight at him and said:

"Mr. Agar Halfi, a few days ago I had a similar dream to the one I related to you the last time you called."

Here she noticed that a quick look of interest came into his eyes, but he did not speak, so she continued:

"And I should like to tell you all about it."

"Tell me what you wish," he answered in his grave way.

She paused, as if to collect her thoughts, and then frankly and clearly related all that she had seen and heard in her vision. While she spoke, his dark solemn eyes never left her face, and when she had finished, she instinctively returned his gaze, while she waited for him to reply.

"Your dream, needless to say, deals with yourself principally, but it also deals with the 'Worlstoke

Mystery.' From it, I read that the matter will be cleared up before the moon is on the wane, but whether this moon or the next, I cannot say. How it will be settled, it is not given to us to know, but you may clearly understand that you will be concerned in it. In the working out of your life on the physical plane, this mystery in some way forms one of the obstacles, which, if you fail to overcome it, will retard your development perhaps for centuries! But in the mystery you are not one of the principal individuals, you are only drawn into it through another.

"The first symbol of the vision, the figure 18, is that of destruction, and needs no further explanation. The second symbol, the figure 22, is that of the perfect state, or the harmony of oneself with the universe. But understand that the overcoming of this present obstacle will not take you straight away to that plane. No person living on the earth could attain perfection straight away.

"The advice, 'Be true to yourself,' if properly understood, is all that is necessary for you to succeed."

While she listened, it seemed to Constance as if her eyes were opened, and she realised that which before she had only believed. The man who sat before her was a Mystic, one of that little known and less understood section of humanity, which, devoting itself to the advancement of the world through the Occult, had made their labours effective in the evolution of life, though not generally recognised. She had read of such men once or twice, but to her knowledge had not met one before.

" Can you tell me anything of that which is to be revealed to me ? "

" No, on that point I must not speak."

She looked at him steadily, as he answered, and his deep dark eyes seemed to glow with a strange light. Then, instantaneously, almost before she knew it had happened, she was conscious that she beheld the man, the true inner self, radiating with a soft white fire, so dazzling, that it seemed to scorch her through and through.

With a startled cry, she hid her face in her hands, and in that moment, she suffered, and understood how small, how feebly flickered the undeveloped spark of life which was her conscious self. As she realised this, the vastness of the eternal universe gripped her mind,—how insignificant she was, how helpless !

" Save me ! " she cried wildly, " Save me ! " and the echo reverberated like thunder in the lonely darkness, " Save me ! " " Save me ! " as though mocking her pitiful cry.

She felt a strong hand grasp her own, and a friendly tender voice said :

" Save yourself, child."

Then she regained normal consciousness, and knew that she was sitting in a chair, staring tranquilly at Agar Halfi, who sat with legs crossed, his hands clasping his knee, looking at her intently.

" What has happened ? " she asked absently, " Ah ! I remember, you were interpreting my dream, and all at once I forgot. Had you finished ? "

" I have nothing more to say concerning it," he replied. " Have you anything you wish to ask ? "

Constance shook her head, and looked meditatively at the carpet. Then impulsively she raised her head and exclaimed :

" Tell me, Mr. Agar Halfi, what is the meaning of life ? Sometimes, as I go through its details day by day, a great fear presses on me that after all we are but helpless atoms, drifting in a vast scheme, and that our self-conscious individuality is but a phantasm, non-existent ! "

A great sorrow came into his face as he replied :

" It is quite impossible, Miss Alletson, for any human being to answer your question. What you express is the cry of your real self, seeking escape from its clay prison, the narrow walls of which can no longer satisfy your inward growth. So sure as all individuals must some time or other save themselves, so surely must they find the answer to that question, by their own efforts. The physical individuality cannot explain it—the brain has its limits, and to our reason such a question is impossible of reply."

" Then must each one struggle to gain his or her salvation, every one fight selfishly for themselves ? That is what your answer seems to imply."

" Just the reverse. I am not a Christian, Miss Alletson, yet I will quote from the Bible in support of what I say : ' Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it ; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.' It is only by sacrificing oneself in the service of humanity that salvation—or more truly speaking the upward development of the conscious self—can be achieved ! "

"But, Mr. Agar Halfi, life in general is not based upon such lines. The sordid struggle for material gain dominates humanity, and, based on reason, humanity says: "It is the law of nature, this 'survival of the fittest,' and therefore, we being part of nature, are bound by it."

"What you say is largely true, the trend of the world to-day is for material gain. But surely, if slowly, humanity is finding out its mistake, and though to-day civilisation is based on wrong conceptions and little understood laws, it will not always be so. We are discovering that instead of having to abide by the laws of nature, we are here to subdue nature to our will. Mankind has changed, compared with, say, 4000 years ago, changed with the knowledge and powers it has gained, and will continue to do so, until the ideas of to-day are largely reversed."

"You speak emphatically," answered Constance, "as though you knew for certain!"

"I can only speak from my own knowledge," he replied simply. "From where I stand, I can see the mistakes of to-day, as surely as present mankind can see and profit by the mistakes of its forebears."

Constance listened intently, wondering at this strange man, and she smiled to herself as she thought that he was the servant of an English gentleman. There was something queer about that, which she felt she would like to know. But then, it was not her business to inquire.

"When you say, 'From where I stand,' I am afraid I do not comprehend."

" That is difficult for me to explain, Miss Alletson, yet if I say to you that the more spiritually developed a human being becomes, the less does he require material things, then have I told you all. For as humanity becomes more spiritual, so will material things of the earth become of little importance. Is it not a fact that the most spiritual, the grandest and most beloved figure in Christianity, thought less of the things of the world than anyone ? He, the Master Magician ! "

" Of course you speak of Jesus of Nazareth ? " she said in a low voice, then added : " And why do you speak of Him as ' The Master Magician ' ? "

" Simply because He had greater control over the forces of nature than any man ever had before Him, and so far ever has had ! "

" You speak of Him as a man ; don't you think he was Divine ? "

The Hindoo shrugged his shoulders, with a little gesture of despair :

" We are all divine, Miss Alletson, in that sense."

There was a pause—Constance did not want to pursue the matter any further just then. What the Hindoo had said gave her much food for thought, and she would think things out at her leisure.

At length she said :

" Let me see, you said Friday was the day you had fixed for the experiment ? "

" Yes," he answered, " at seven o'clock in the evening, at the Manor. Mr. Brentwood will come over with his car, and take you all there. I shall not be able to come, owing to the preparations I must make beforehand."

" Do you think you will succeed ? "

He smiled strangely, as he replied :

" I have not many doubts, Miss Alletson, and yet I fear trouble ; why, I cannot say. Now I think I have said all that is necessary, and I will depart."

Rising, he wished her good afternoon, but before he reached the door Constance arrested his attention :

" Oh, Mr. Agar Halfi, I really forgot to tell you. The last time you came here, you will remember, I was very much out of sorts, and you told me that I should feel better before three o'clock in the afternoon. Well, it was so. I felt practically recovered about an hour after lunch. Please accept my sincere thanks."

" For what, Miss Alletson ? " he asked questioningly.

She hesitated a little, then said frankly, " Well, I feel sure that it was you who did me good, in some way."

" I apologise," he answered quickly, " I was not thinking. I understand now. It is true that indirectly I cured your indisposition, but I had forgotten it."

" How indirectly ? " she queried.

" You were suffering from a slight shock, which deprived you of normal vitality, left you run down, and listless. Coming in contact with my surroundings, and there being a sympathetic link between us, I naturally gave forth from my reserve, of which there is a considerable quantity, and you as naturally absorbed it. Simply that, and nothing else occurred."

She looked at him astonished, so he continued :

" It is easy of proof, Miss Alletson—give me your hand for a moment."

She did as he asked, and slowly, but surely, she was conscious of increased energy ; she felt stronger, more vigorous.

" Do you feel any change ? "

" Yes, I do ; it is wonderful. How pleasant to have power to relieve suffering like that ! "

The Hindoo smiled queerly, as he answered in a low voice :

" Yes, but it can be used for other purposes—it is strong enough to kill ! "

" Kill ? " she whispered in an awed voice.

But Agar Halfi had gone, and the next moment she heard the motor car drive slowly away.

CHAPTER XXII

ALMOST A TRAGEDY!

HERBERT CANNING had arranged to be at the Vicarage at 6.30 P.M. on Friday, the day the attempt was to be made to restore Miss Hobson's memory. The matter was of personal interest to him, apart from his professional obligation. He had dabbled in astrology, had some notion of planetary influence, and indeed only lack of opportunity had kept him from studying other occult things.

What knowledge he had gained in astrology had been acquired by practical experiments, the theory of it, like that of anything else, not being satisfactory to a matter-of-fact nature like his. He preferred that sort of proof—certainly the most convincing—to any reasoning that could be extracted from books.

It would be well if there were more people in the world of the same turn of mind. As it is, most of us allow a few to do our thinking, *i.e.* do not think at all, while most of the few only think, and never experiment, which after all is the only sound way to acquire knowledge.

As the detective walked leisurely along, he was turning over in his mind the following facts:

(1) Rev. Thornton disappeared 21st February, at the full moon.

(2) Miss Hobson disappeared 4th April, at the new moon.

(3) Rev. Alletson had strange experience 19th April, at the full moon.

(4) Herbert Canning had strange experience 3rd May, at the new moon.

(5) To-day, an unusual experiment taking place, 16th May, at the full moon.

Now that is queer, he thought. I should hardly think it could be coincidence that the date of this affair should have been fixed by that Hindoo gentleman when the moon is at the full! If there is anything in my theory at all, something will happen to-night, the same as things have happened before at these periods.

He analysed it for some time, as, being a practical man, he was very anxious not to delude himself. He knew that his knowledge of astrology was superficial, but what he had learned had been gained by practical experience, and he was interested. Further, the tabulated facts would be useful for study in his leisure moments.

During his long and varied experience, he had seen numerous so-called occult manifestations, most of which, he had satisfied himself, were mere trickery. But on one or two occasions he had witnessed things which, analyse as he would, had appeared to him genuine, and he had not allowed prejudice to condemn everything wholesale.

He was fully aware that it is usually those who are ignorant of a subject who vilify and condemn it. Indeed he had read about a famous astronomer who had attacked and tried to ridicule astrology. All went well until a colleague, who had

carefully studied astrology, clearly demonstrated to the astronomer that he was making himself look ridiculous.

What he had experienced at the priory ruins was a problem sufficient to make the most sceptical think seriously. On the one hand, as Mr. Shepperton had suggested, it probably was trickery. That, however, was simply a statement, against which he could reasonably put the following:

Firstly, he was personally satisfied that no trickery could have caused the sickly, paralysing fear that had gripped him.

Secondly, the footprints, if a fake, were the cleverest thing of the kind he had seen.

Thirdly, it was difficult to point to any object in committing the crimes. The only possible motive could be blood-lust, and if he were any judge of character, neither the Master of Storton nor the Hindoo were criminals of that type.

Fourthly, Miss Alletson's evidence, if a fact, pointed to something very grave indeed. Either the Master of Storton was a new type of criminal, or else—what?

Mr. Canning shook his head, it was beyond his understanding at present. Still, that last item constituted the only real evidence against Mr. Brentwood. This he had intimated to Mr. Shepperton, who did not seem over-pleased at the conclusion; but then, the detective had seen pretty plainly from the beginning that that gentleman was suffering from bias, no doubt caused by the shock he had received. They could have as many suspicions as they pleased;

the only thing that would trouble Mr. Canning was evidence.

Just before he reached the Vicarage, he was passed by a motor-brougham, which slowed up at the gate, and he at once concluded that the driver was Mr. Brentwood. In this he was correct, and a few minutes later he was being introduced to him by the Vicar.

The detective's keen trained glance took in every detail of the other man's visible characteristics while he wished him good evening, and he satisfied his first impression, that the Master of Storton was not of the criminal type so far as he knew; but, like his Eastern servant, had a strong personality, and would be a very difficult man with whom to have trouble, being a type that would fight to the last.

What, however, mystified the detective more than anything else was, that he could not help being drawn to the man, in the same way that he had felt drawn to the Hindoo!

It was a very solemn and quiet party that drove off a few minutes later. Constance and Elsie, with the Vicar and Shepperton, occupied the brougham, while the detective sat beside Brentwood in front.

The latter drove in silence, his attention being taken up with his work, and the detective, feeling retrospective, did not disturb him. It was not until negotiating a sharp bend in the road that the Master of Storton spoke:

"That is a nasty turn," he remarked quietly.

"Yes, it seems rather sharp," replied the other.

The ice being broken, Mr. Canning took what seemed like a plunge :

" Do you hope for a successful result to-night ? "

Brentwood smiled a little at the bluntness of the question, as he replied :

" If what we surmise is correct, that the trouble is purely one of the mind, and is not in any way caused by physical disorder, I have not much doubt about the issue."

" And if there were any physical cause ? "

" Oh, that would be quite another matter. The experiment in that case would be useless."

Further conversation was not possible, for by now they had reached the Manor, but as the car stopped, the Master of Storton said :

" I shall probably have something to say before the experiment takes place, which will no doubt be of particular interest to you all."

The Tower study, which Agar Halfi had decided should be the scene of his operations, was a revelation to Shepperton and Canning, when about five minutes later the party was conducted there, and the Vicar was busy answering questions which they put to him concerning it, for quite a time.

As for Constance, as soon as she put her foot in the room she experienced a feeling of dread, and almost put forth both her hands, as if to ward something off. A slight giddiness overcame her, and try as she would to shake it off, the idea dominated her mind that the influence of some other presence pervaded the room, silent, mysterious, evil.

She struggled bravely with herself, and as the thought came into her mind of her responsibility

to Elsie, who was practically in her charge, she by an effort partly overcame her forebodings, and stepped firmly into the study.

The east window was open, and, with a feeling of relief, she quietly went to it and looked out, inhaling the fresh night air with satisfaction. She tried to compose herself, repeating in her mind how silly it was to be upset by her imagination, but her limbs trembled beneath her, and gladly would she have fled, but for her sense of duty.

She gazed abstractedly at the rising moon, now appearing over the hills, and noticed that it was tinged red, with the last rays of the setting sun. It fascinated her fancy, and for a time her thoughts wandered dreamily. All at once it occurred to her that the apparent blood-redness of the moon was an ominous sign. Was there going to be a tragedy at the experiment to-night? She instinctively clasped her hands together, then the moon appeared to sway to and fro; she mechanically grasped the casement, and by a supreme effort of will, saved herself from fainting.

How long she stood gaining control over her physical organism she did not know, but a gentle pressure on her arm caused her to start slightly. Turning, she looked into the serious but kind face of her brother, who said in a low tone:

"My dear Constance, are you all right? They may think you are neglecting Elsie!"

"I'm so sorry, Philip, I've been dreaming," she answered with a faint smile, and then she at once went over to Miss Hobson.

The study had been carefully arranged for the

occasion, and even Alletson, who knew it well, was surprised. The north wall, which he always remembered as being covered with a great hanging curtain, had disappeared, and he realised that the study did not occupy the whole space of the Tower. There was a further room on the north side, which evidently was only divided from it by a folding wooden partition, which the curtain usually screened. This had been thrown open, revealing the other room, the floor of which was raised about a foot above the level of the other. The curtain had been transferred to the further side, and the place gave the appearance of a great room, with a raised platform at one end.

Across the centre of the study was a long low table, and on the opposite side of it to the platform were placed several chairs, evidently for the onlookers. On the platform itself, placed across the front eastern corner, was a long low couch like an ottoman, except that the head was only raised about a foot above the body of it. Fitted against it was a cylindrical-shaped cushion. On either side was a brazier, supported on a metal stand of curious Eastern workmanship. In the centre of the platform, near the edge, stood a small marble-topped table, which had on it a large flask and a wine-glass. A thick Indian carpet covered the floor, and the electric light from the brackets on either wall, east and west, was subdued by violet shades.

Shepperton smiled a little sarcastically as he noted the arrangements, and remarked to the detective in a low voice :

"A very pretty show, eh?"

Canning nodded, and replied a little curtly:

"If the result is as good as the show, Mr. Shepperton, you will not have cause to complain."

A stubborn expression came into the young solicitor's eyes, and gripping the other's arm, he whispered:

"If I see anything that is not absolutely straight, I shall not hesitate to shoot!"

The detective, beyond slightly shrugging his shoulders, did not reply to this remark, but incidentally he happened to be always on the side of Shepperton where he knew that gentleman was carrying a revolver, and when they sat down for the experiment, he had not altered that position.

During the short silence which followed, the attention of all was attracted by the entrance of their host, followed by Agar Halfi. They looked in surprise at the Hindoo. He was dressed Orientally—a large white muslin turban adorned his head, and a long flowing robe of the same colour and material almost reached his feet. His natural dignity seemed to be increased by his native dress, and indeed for a moment it seemed as if he might have been some Eastern potentate being received in a strange court, so noble did he look. But he himself at once dispelled the thought, by the natural ease with which he conducted himself.

Accompanied by the Master of Storton, he ascended the platform, and stood with folded arms between the couch and the table in the centre. Brentwood went to the other side, and in his

cold measured way addressed the others who were sitting in the study :

" To-night I feel it incumbent upon me to introduce to you my friend and companion, Mr. Agar Halfi, in a new light. Hitherto you have known him simply as a servant of my household. That in a sense is true, but the position is one of his own making, and his reasons for it I do not consider it necessary to discuss. Suffice it that in his own country Mr. Agar Halfi is a doctor of medicine; more, he is a master of the occult. I mention these facts, in order to settle any uneasiness that might have been felt with regard to his ability to deal with Miss Hobson's case.

Mr. Agar Halfi has been my close friend for many years, and I have absolute trust in his honour and integrity. If it is at all possible to restore to Miss Hobson her memory, he will, I am certain, be able to accomplish it. The worth of my words will, I trust, be proved later on this evening.

Now on that point I would like to say a word or two before Mr. Agar Halfi proceeds to experiment.

Miss Hobson's disorder is understood, and rightly so, to be a case of lost memory. Such a thing could arise from three causes : firstly, by a physical injury to the brain; secondly, by a shock to the nervous system; and thirdly, by a psychic obsession of the mind. The latter cause I can best explain by mentioning that little understood state of what is called trance. No doubt all of you have heard of people being thrown into such a condition—sometimes for weeks and weeks—which has baffled all medical skill. In most cases, the entranced persons

have been found to be perfectly healthy physically, have taken food regularly, and have eventually regained normal consciousness, apparently little the worse for their strange experience. The law which governs this phenomenon is little understood in Western civilisation, except in so far as it relates to hypnotism, but in the East it is not only understood, but can be produced at will. In Miss Hobson's case, we have the testimony of Dr. Trestlewood that she is in ordinary physical health, and that there is no external injury to the brain.

It is evident that she first suffered a shock to the nervous system, followed almost immediately by a state of trance, similar to that into which I was cast when in Afghanistan, the difference between the two incidents being, that I recovered normal consciousness, whereas Miss Hobson has not. In other words, the obsession in her case has not left her, in my case it did——"

Here he faltered, and a bewildered look came over his handsome face, as though some unknown presence had given him the lie direct; but recovering himself almost immediately, he concluded:

"Mr. Agar Halfi will now attempt to remove that obsession by a method known only in the East, and there by but a few. Please keep as quiet as possible; it is essential that no disturbing element should irritate the psychic conditions of the room during the experiment."

Having thus spoken, Brentwood asked Constance if she would take Elsie to Mr. Agar Halfi, and then sat down.

With a word of encouragement, Constance clasped

Elsie by the hand, and escorted her to the couch on the platform. As soon as she had seen her comfortably seated, she turned to the Hindoo and whispered:

"Did you notice Mr. Brentwood falter when speaking?"

"Yes, and I feel that a crisis is at hand. But compose yourself, Miss Alletson, and remember the advice given to you in your dream. I will guard you!"

As he spoke, he looked steadily into her eyes, and Constance felt new strength enter her soul.

"Thank you," she answered simply, "I will remember," and then she quietly returned to her chair.

The Hindoo silently switched off all the lights in the study, leaving only the shaded ones on the platform undisturbed. Then striking a match, he applied it to each brazier, on either side of the couch. Suddenly a thin straight column of green smoke began to ascend from the one on the east side, shortly followed by a column of red smoke from the other, filling the air with a faint aromatic perfume. Quietly turning to the table in the centre, Agar Halfi opened the flask which was upon it, and poured some of its contents into a wine-glass. This he proffered to Miss Hobson, asking her in a gentle voice to drink it. She took it mechanically, put it to her lips, and tasted it. Evidently it was to her liking, for she immediately drank it up.

Taking the glass from her fingers, the Hindoo returned it to the table; then going back to the couch, stood silently looking at his patient. Sud-

denly she rose quickly, and extending her arms toward him, gave a little cry of pleasure, but instantaneously, almost before the cry had escaped her lips, her expression altered, the colour fled from her face, and with a sigh she fell back on the couch; her head dropped forward, her limbs relaxed, her hands appeared listless, and it was apparent that she had lost consciousness.

Very gently the Hindoo placed her full length on the couch, her head resting on the cushion at its head, and she seemed to be just in a peaceful sleep. He looked at her intently; gradually the colour left her lips, then her cheeks, the regular heave of her bosom became slower and slower, until it apparently ceased; her features grew set, like wax, and at last she was to all appearances, dead!

Unnerved, Shepperton drew in a sharp breath, and would have started up from his chair, had not a grip on his arm, which hurt, held him down, while the low clear voice of the detective whispered quickly in his ear:

"Silence, man; would you kill her?"

Satisfied, Agar Halfi stepped back, and stood with folded arms staring rigidly just behind the head of the couch, which, owing to the position of the shades on the lights, was in deep shadow. All eyes followed his gaze, and as they looked, a faint vaporous mist appeared, as though drawn from the body of the prostrate girl, and collecting just behind her head, hung about two feet above the third brazier, flickering feebly with a dull grey light.

Apparently content, the experimenter turned his attention to the other two vessels, from which were

now ascending two steady flames of red and green fire. Lifting the brazier on his left from the stand, he emptied its contents into the empty one at the head of the couch, then did the same thing with the other. Immediately there issued a dense white mist, soon followed by a tall column of white fire, which, glowing with a soft bright light, shot up into the air, and seemed to completely devour the dull mist suspended above it.

This continued for about a minute, then gradually a change came over the scene. The fire, which had completely left the brazier, now appeared to become absorbed by the mist, which still hung over the silver vessel, and was glowing brilliantly in the surrounding shade.

With quick, deft hands, the Hindoo drew away the brazier from under the mist, and silently going to the foot of the couch, stretched forth his arms over Elsie's still form, as though trying to reach the fire at the other end of the couch with his finger-tips. For fully five minutes he stood thus, while the others looked on in wondering apprehension. Gradually the bright light above Miss Hobson's head began to stream down toward the Hindoo's hands, and slowly he stepped back little by little, as though drawing the fire with him, until it completely enveloped the whole of the couch. It remained like this for some time, then it grew less, and less, until it had entirely disappeared!

Not until the white fire had completely vanished, did Agar Halfi move, then going to the left side of the couch, he took the girl's listless hands in his own, and stood gazing at her face with steady, flashing

eyes. This he continued to do for some minutes, and at last a faint shade of colour tinged her cheeks; then gradually the rise and fall of her breast denoted that she was breathing, and in a short time she again appeared to be in an ordinary peaceful sleep.

Something like a sigh of relief went up from the others, when they saw that the patient had assumed a more life-like expression. Turning toward them, Agar Halfi said calmly:

"I have finished. It now only remains for me to awaken Miss Hobson, and then we shall know whether or not the experiment has been successful. It would be as well if Miss Alletson will come and sit by her, so that when she regains consciousness she may have somebody near whom she knows."

Constance looked at Arthur Shepperton hesitatingly—

"Yes, please go," he said.

With quick steps, she went and sat on the side of the couch, and took the unconscious girl's hand in her own. Agar Halfi went to the other side of the couch, and looked steadily into Elsie's face for about a minute; then he turned to Constance, and saying quickly:

"In ten seconds she will awaken," went and stood by the curtain which hung on the north wall.

Elsie opened her eyes with a blank expression; then feeling that someone had hold of her hand, turned her head to look. For a moment she gazed as though surprised, and during that brief space of suspense, Constance's heart almost ceased to beat.

"Where am I, Miss Alletson?"

As she spoke, Constance felt her heart jump, then

with an effort she controlled her feelings, though a look of joy came over her face.

"You have been very ill, Miss Hobson; don't you remember?"

"Well, I have some idea about it, but where am I?"

"Do you feel all right?"

"Oh yes." Saying which, she sat up and looked around. The next moment she rose quickly, and exclaiming, "Arthur!" went over to her lover, who had risen to meet her.

There was a lump in his throat, and his eyes were wet, as he took her hand. In a voice strange with emotion he said:

"Then you know me, Elsie?"

"Know you? Of course I do, dear," and she looked at him, surprised. "But where are we, Arthur? I'm bewildered; what has happened?"

It was as much as he could do to answer coherently, so great was his joy. "We are at the Manor, Elsie; you lost your memory, and it has been restored to you. Come, let me introduce you to the gentleman who has so successfully carried through the experiment. Mr. Agar Halfi," he cried warmly, "please come and be thanked by your patient, and me, indeed by us all."

Thus addressed, the Hindoo advanced slowly from where he was standing, and Constance formally introduced him to Elsie Hobson, who, after looking at him wonderingly, thanked him quietly.

"It is all so strange," she said, "I hardly know what to make of it!'

"That will soon be all right, Miss Hobson," re-

plied the Vicar kindly, "and now, let me introduce you to Mr. Brentwood, our host. I don't think you have met him before."

A strange silence fell on them all, as Alletson spoke. Each felt that a critical moment had arrived, and in particular, Constance had a sensation of sickness, similar to that which sometimes forewarns one of danger. Would or would she not say, "That man is the culprit!"

"Mr. Brentwood, please."

The Master of Storton, who, since the time he had sat down after speaking, had not moved from his chair, rose when the Vicar called his name, and advanced to them along the platform, while they moved forward to meet him.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Hobson," he said courteously, "and doubly pleased to know that you are now quite recovered."

He spoke quite collectedly, without any trace whatever of conscious guilt, and certainly Canning —whose eyes never left his face—was satisfied that if the Master of Storton was not an innocent man, he had never seen one before.

Elsie's face flushed with pleasure, as she returned her thanks, and she smiled up into his face. But as her eyes met his, the smile died. She took two or three short, sharp breaths, a look of terror crossed her face, and then, with a shriek, she turned and fled blindly into the arms of the detective, who was standing about two yards away.

"Save me!" she moaned. "Save me!"

They all rushed to her, wonder-stricken; then their attention was arrested by a cry of rage from Arthur

Shepperton, who was looking fixedly at the platform. Following his eyes, they stood spellbound at what they saw.

Standing with clenched hands, a look of intense agony on his face, was the Master of Storton, partially enveloped in a green mist, while his eyes scintillated with a fierce, cruel look. So great was the change in his features, that it was almost impossible to recognise the usually calm, handsome face, which looked diabolical, with the short dark hair standing up on end.

Gradually the mist completely enveloped his figure, and out of the vapourish folds, two awful eyes began to glow, with a terrible, malignant gleam, that has never been seen in human gaze. Instinctively Canning, who knew at once that what he now beheld was the same as the manifestation in the priory, placed himself in front of the half-fainting girl, who had rushed into his arms; but beyond that he could not stir, indeed a terrible silence filled the room. So powerful was that hellish influence, that all of them stood horror-stricken, unable to move.

Constance Alletson knew now what it was that had upset her. That which she had seen in Mr. Brentwood's eyes during the experiment at the Manor was the evil now manifesting before them, the mysterious horror which had killed Mr. Thornton, and very nearly killed Elsie Hobson. She gazed in a fascinated manner, she felt weirdly calm, and then all at once she became aware that those dreadful orbs were looking at her alone. She felt sick, and a feeling of intense loathing passed through her. Then something seemed to call, attract her; what

it was she could not tell, but it appealed to something deep down in her nature, in a way which she had never understood before. All she could realise was that it was evil, and much as she knew she hated it, she felt she was held by its power. She moved forward one step, then another, and with helpless horror, those other spectators of this strange scene saw that she was slowly being drawn toward the awful thing on the platform.

Nearer and nearer she drew, and it seemed as if another tragedy was to be enacted, when all at once the silence was broken by a deep growl, and there emerged from underneath the long table fixed across the room, right between the helpless woman and the horror on the platform, Brentwood's dog, Hector!

At first he stood looking, whimpering as with terror, and he backed away right up against Constance's dress, and stood shivering as with an ague. Whether it was the touch of the woman, or what, it is not possible to say; anyhow, the dog's attitude suddenly changed; his hair bristled, his eyes flamed, and with a deep bay he gave one mighty spring, straight at those cruel, evil eyes.

There followed a horrible chuckling screech, which ceased instantaneously, as though cut off by a sharp human cry. Constance heard it, as one in a dream; it sounded to her as if someone had been hurt. Then all at once she became fully conscious. With a sharp breath, she clutched her breast as she felt a pain at her heart, just as if she had been stabbed, only a thousand times more poignant. That voice she knew, it was Mr. Brentwood's, and heedless of all

else, she started to run forward, but stumbled against the raised floor, and fell. She was on her feet in a moment, and as she rose she saw Agar Halfi leap on to the platform. The next moment there was a quick blinding glare, which lighted up the room, followed by a crackling sound; the green mist seemed to spread everywhere, then gradually the air cleared, and Constance saw dimly the figure of the Hindoo kneeling over the prostrate body of the Master of Storton, who lay white and still, his neck and left shoulder covered with blood, which slowly dripped down on the carpet. Beside him crouched the dog, shivering and whining, and licking his master's hand, as though in grief at what he had done.

Instantly she was there, and as she approached she heard Agar Halfi exclaim in a stricken voice:

"My master, my beloved friend, speak to me! Oh! I fear I have annihilated him also!"

"No, not that!" The Hindoo looked up mechanically, to meet Constance's eyes, filled with a new fear, her face very pale and drawn. "Do not say—he cannot be dead!"

But no hope was to be read from the Hindoo's stony countenance. Regardless who saw her, Constance went down on her knees, and clasped the limp fingers of the stricken man.

"Dead! Dead!" she moaned brokenly. What did anything matter now that his life had gone? Too late she knew, murderer or anything else, that she loved him, and in her newly created grief she madly asked that she could die also.

The next moment she stared, wonder-stricken.

His eyes had opened, and he was looking at her in a strange bewildered way.

"No, not yet," he said slowly, then fainted right away. Agar Halfi gave an exclamation of joy, and leaping to his feet said:

"He lives, and there is hope!"

A firm grasp on her arm brought Constance to her senses, and the next minute her brother raised her from the ground.

"Come," he said in a hard voice. He felt keenly what his sister had revealed to them all. "Come, Constance, while we remove Mr. Brentwood to his chamber."

Very carefully they carried the unconscious man to his bedroom beneath the study. There, the Hindoo summoned Mrs. Breton, and after telling her not to inform the rest of the servants, explained that the master had had a serious accident, and bid her obtain water and bandages. It took but a few minutes to fetch what was necessary, and having consigned Constance and Elsie—the latter having fairly recovered from her last shock—to the housekeeper's care, Agar Halfi, with the aid of the other men, cut away Brentwood's upper garments and carefully dressed the wounded shoulder, which he found to be a severe fracture, caused by the dog's formidable jaws.

When he had almost finished, he stopped suddenly and exclaimed in a low voice of surprise, "Look!" at the same time pointing to the unconscious man's exposed throat.

They all drew nearer, wondering, then almost with one voice they exclaimed:

"The scar!" . . . It had turned blood-red!

CHAPTER XXIII

"THE WRITING ON THE WALL"

It need hardly be said that the joy of Mrs. and Mr. Hobson, at having their daughter restored to them, was unbounded. At one time they had never expected to see her again, and their delight at her discovery had been almost dashed away when they found that she did not recognise them. But now all was well once more in their household.

As for Arthur Shepperton, he lost the careworn appearance that had characterised him for the last month, and again became the cheerful, energetic young man that everybody had known, before the shadow of tragedy had fallen upon him.

But one of the actors in this weird drama had not any cause for joy. The day following that terrible experience at Storton Manor, Constance Alletson stood at the garden gate, gazing despondently before her. Now that she had had time to think, she realised with deep dismay what she had done.

Never in her wildest dreams had she thought a time would come when she would expose to others that which, at all costs, should have remained locked in her soul's safe keeping. To have done that was unfortunate enough; but it was not her only fear; what if *he* had understood? She hoped and prayed that the Master of Storton had not divined her secret, as she fully knew the others had done, and

the fact that he had been barely conscious at the time brought some relief to her tortured mind.

This, then, she reflected, was the secret of her existence which in her dream the spirit of the priest foretold should be revealed to her. This: that life, which hitherto had been pleasant enough if not exactly joyous, was now bereft of every vestige of colour. Indeed, so hopeless did the outlook appear that she almost despaired of being able to face it.

She suffered, as many others have done, the torture of hopeless affection, and understood only too well the terrible truth of those world-known lines:

> "Tis better to have loved and lost
> Than never to have loved at all."

True, she had not lost in a strict sense, but to know that her whole self was consumed in one other, and that that other had never shown her a single favour, worse, that he was looked upon and known as a cold, selfish individual, was as good as to have lost.

Only too well she now realised the dominating power of the eternal flame. Its awakening had brought a crowd of dim recollections to her mind. It was not new, this love, it had only slumbered unconsciously in her heart since some long-forgotten age.

And it was no girl's fancy that possessed her, no fleeting passion of the flesh. It was the all-powerful, self-sacrificing love of a mature woman, who knew her own heart well enough to understand that it meant everything, her very life.

Oh, the agonising sweetness of it all! Despairingly she realised that either she must live the rest

of her life with that one man, or else—ah, go right away, and mercilessly crush down her nature; she would have to take the veil. No, there was another alternative—she could die! She shuddered as she thought of it. She felt conscious that she had no right to take her own life; and yet, she reflected, why not? If life were to become a pain, could she be expected to endure it?

With a sigh, she turned, and walking slowly into the house, threw herself on to a couch. Burying her face in her arms, she tried to forget, and worn out with many an hour's weary vigil, she fell into a restful sleep. Sleeping, she dreamed that a pair of cold brown eyes looked into her own, searching her very soul; and looking, they changed, gradually growing warm, then tender. As she gazed into their mysterious depths, she seemed to read the secret of the soul behind them. Surely eternal love shone there? Her own spirit responded to the call, and she was aware of an ecstasy such as she had never known before.

Before leaving the Manor on the night of the experiment, Mr. Alletson had arranged that they should all meet at the Vicarage the following Monday, to further discuss the position of affairs.

To this meeting Constance had looked forward with a certain amount of dread. She did not wish to meet anyone; naturally she shrank from coming in contact with people who understood the position in which she was placed. But she was not a weakling, and, somewhat to her brother's surprise, she had decided to be present; indeed, she had resolved to face the matter out to the bitter end.

To her relief, Philip had not so much as spoken a word upon the subject of her distress. On the other hand she was conscious of his deep sympathy, and though she hardly realised it at the time, she knew later that she would probably have sunk under the weight of her despair, but for her brother's unspoken support.

It was a very serious and solemn party that gathered at the Vicarage on the Monday afternoon. The Vicar sat at the head of the table; on his right hand, was the Hindoo mystic; on his left the detective; while further down on either side sat Miss Hobson and Arthur Shepperton, Constance faced her brother at the foot of the table.

When they were all seated, Mr. Alletson said:

"As you all know, we are gathered here this afternoon to see if we can in some satisfactory way clear up this mystery. To that end, I am going to express the wish that everyone will be quite frank in what they say, and withhold nothing that they know, so that the whole position up to the present may be made clear to us all. Unless you wish to adopt some other form of procedure, I propose first of all to ask Mr. Agar Halfi to state what he knows about this evil thing."

When he was in deadly earnest, the Vicar had a certain impressive way of speaking, and the nod of approval which Shepperton gave, caused a glint of amusement to enter the detective's eyes. The day after the scene at Storton Manor, it had taken him fully three hours to prevent his client from having Brentwood arrested, and even when they sat down to the table for this meeting, Canning

had not been sure what attitude Shepperton would take.

There was no dissension to Alletson's proposal, so the Hindoo began :

"I am going to plainly state all that I know concerning this mystery which has caused us all so much trouble. When I have done, I trust it will in some way prove that my friend Mr. Brentwood, instead of being the guilty party in this unfortunate tragedy, has been a more unfortunate victim of it than anyone present.

Mr. Brentwood and I first came in contact with it in this manner : Some five years ago, when acting as his lieutenant, while he was travelling in Eastern countries collecting facts in support of certain theories he had in connection with psychic phenomena, after a successful expedition, we encountered this mysterious thing, in Afghanistan, just before crossing the Persian border, on the way to England. What happened there you already know, and the proofs of it are in Mr. Brentwood's official diary, which is on the table, and which, I understand from Mr. Alletson, you have all examined. To all intents and purposes, with the exception of the white scar on his throat, the Master of Storton, after lying in a trance for nearly six weeks, suddenly recovered. Shortly after that, he came and settled down here.

For about twelve months nothing out of the ordinary happened, then, quite without warning, he had a queer experience one morning at dawn. He related it to me sometime after breakfast on the same day. He told me that he woke up all at once, wide awake, as if from sleep ; but when trying to

switch on the electric light by his bed, he discovered it was not there, in fact, that there was not a bed. Then he felt a floating sensation, next one of compression, and finally he found himself in his night attire, staring out of the east window of his study.

Subsequently he suffered these strange experiences at different intervals. We were of course interested, but could make nothing of them, try as we would. We never dreamed that they could have any connection with the Afghan manifestation.

One day, following one of these episodes, came the startling news of the disappearance of Mr. Thornton, followed a fortnight later by that of Miss Hobson. Next, Mr. Alletson had an uncomfortable experience at the priory. He approached Mr. Brentwood over the matter, after giving it serious consideration, and they decided to privately investigate the matter.

The first item of importance occurred when, in an attempt to obtain a clue by means of a psychic experiment carried out at the Manor, Miss Alletson —the medium of that experiment—received a most disconcerting shock. In her own words, she suffered the mental horror of being attacked by some influence which without doubt appeared to be part of, or in some way connected with, the Master of Storton. I believe you are all acquainted with the details of what Miss Alletson went through. Mr. Brentwood, the operator at that experiment, was fully cognisant of what occurred, and subsequently he came to consult me about it. In order to test the thing, he hypnotised the dog Hector,

with the result that the animal showed the same symptoms as Miss Alletson, indeed, just when the hypnotic sleep was manifest, the dog broke from its master's control, and it was only by acute presence of mind that Mr. Brentwood prevented the animal from attacking him.

Mr. Brentwood next experimented on me, but I did not exhibit any unusual sensations, which I put down to the fact that I was, and am now, impervious to the evil, owing to the control I have over a certain force, which—curiously enough—the Master of Storton and I discovered almost at the same time. After that, I hypnotised the dog quite successfully.

Not many days later, Mr. Shepperton found Miss Hobson's glove in the ruins, and, with the aid of Hector, an unsuccessful attempt was made to trace her thereby. But something else happened during that attempt—in a vault in the ruins, the body of Mr. Thornton was discovered, with a wound on his throat which corresponded exactly to Mr. Brentwood's scar, while beside the body were footprints similar to those which I photographed in Afghanistan, after the terrible experience through which Mr. Brentwood and I passed.

What we learned from that discovery set me thinking. I knew now that the evil which had killed Mr. Thornton was the same as that which attacked Mr. Brentwood in Afghanistan. Further, I found that there was a similarity between the sensations Mr. Alletson suffered when he had his strange experience, and those which Miss Alletson had when acting as the medium of the experiment

at Storton Manor. It did not take me long to reason from this, that Mr. Brentwood was either directly or indirectly concerned. That he was directly involved, I never for one moment believed. This conclusion I formed immediately, upon my personal knowledge of him. But I was quite satisfied that he was indirectly concerned, so I decided to watch him closely.

The next step in this strange drama was an experience I myself had at the priory, in conjunction with a stranger who happened to be there at the same time.

There was a manifestation at dusk, in the form of a green mist, which seemed to evolve into human shape. Shortly after, there was a dreadful cry, similar to that which you all heard the other night at the Manor, followed by the appearance of those cruel eyes.

When I got back to Storton Manor I was suspicious, and went in search of Mr. Brentwood. Mrs. Breton, the housekeeper, said he had gone out, and had left word that he would not be back until late. Now I have the Master of Storton's full confidence, so taking duplicate keys, I went to his bedroom at midnight. The bed was empty, but it showed signs of having been used, consequently I could only surmise that he had gone out. After carefully searching the study, I took the precaution to bolt up every entrance into the house, with the exception of the private way—only used by him and myself—and by which I knew he would most probably return. Across this entrance I carefully tacked a piece of black thread, so that if the door

were opened the thread would most certainly be snapped. Then I went back to my own place.

About dawn the next morning I was awakened by a fierce growl from the dog Hector, who was staring fixedly at the window, apparently at nothing. I went out to look round, and was at once attracted by a portion of the morning mist, which had a faint green tinge. Instantly interested by the colour, I followed it, and to my surprise it went through the open east window of the tower study. In a few minutes it had cleared away, and then I saw the figure of Mr. Brentwood standing in his night attire, exactly in the attitude he had described to me so often, when he suffered his strange experiences.

I immediately went to the private door, and found the thread intact. This proved to me that Mr. Brentwood had not entered the house since he went out about six-thirty the previous evening. But judge of my surprise, when I found that he was not only in the house, but asleep, in bed!

I knew then, that in some way, he was obsessed by this strange evil, but exactly how, it was difficult to say. As I expected, he came that morning after breakfast and told me that he had had another strange experience. I did not say much then—I had determined to follow out my own line of action, independent of everyone.

After this, there came the surprising discovery of Miss Hobson. When we heard that she had lost her memory, Mr. Brentwood at once offered to try and restore it. That he could have done so I have no doubt, and it helped to prove to me that he was unconscious of his obsession. It would be very

unlikely that a criminal would dare to offer to restore one of his victims, knowing that if he succeeded his victim might recognise and denounce him. But there were difficulties in the way. These Mr. Alletson explained to him, so eventually it was agreed that I should make the attempt. What happened at the experiment you all know, and I don't think it requires any other proof to satisfy any one of us that Mr. Brentwood has been, and I believe is now, obsessed by one of the strangest evils that has ever been known in modern times."

The Hindoo paused, then went on slowly:

"There is only one incident in the whole matter with which I am not conversant; I refer to Miss Hobson's experience. Perhaps she will relate to us exactly what took place?"

Elsie blushed as all eyes turned to her, and looked questioningly at her lover. Arthur Shepperton nodded encouragingly, so she began, nervously at first, but gaining confidence as she proceeded:

"It all happened so suddenly, that I have not much to say. I had been on a visit to my aunt's at Melton Storton; and when returning home at dusk, I stopped just to have a look at the priory ruins in the sunset. Nobody was about, and I think I must have stayed about five minutes. As I turned to go, my attention was arrested by an awful cry which came from the direction of the priory. It so horrified me that I could not move, and I felt sick and cold. I must have stood like that for some time, and then again that call came to me. I listened as one hypnotised, and how it happened I do not know; but I began to walk towards the ruins, as

though compelled to do so. I went up the drive, through the doorway in the wall. As I approached the ruined chapel, I came to a dead halt, and my heart gave a great leap. Those terrible eyes, which we all saw at the Manor, were looking at me. They drew nearer and nearer, while I stood as though petrified. As they approached, I thought I saw a great big bird behind them ; but really I was so terrified that I could not take particular notice. I gave a wild shriek, and my hand went to my heart ; in doing so, it clutched the gold cross that I always wear.

I remembered nothing more until I was lying on the couch in the room at the Manor, with Miss Alletson sitting beside me. All that remains for me to say is, that when Mr. Brentwood came to congratulate me on my recovery, the moment I looked into his eyes, I experienced the same dreadful feeling that upset me at the priory. I instinctively felt that there was some terrible evil at the back of the Master of Storton's mind. That is what made me shriek."

There was a long silence after Elsie had spoken, which was eventually broken by the Vicar saying quietly :

" Mr. Agar Halfi has put the facts of the case before us so clearly and so frankly, that I think we owe him our thanks for the trouble he has taken. I say this, because I feel that the evidence before us is sufficient to prove that Mr. Brentwood is a victim, and not the cause of the evil. What do you think, Mr. Shepperton ? "

Thus addressed, the young solicitor shook his head, with a queer sort of smile, then said :

"I do not feel in a very comfortable position. To be quite plain, I feel small, and mean!"

They all looked at him with some surprise, excepting Agar Halfi, who seemed to understand.

"Here am I," he continued, "in the happy position of having had restored to me the lady who is to be my wife, through the efforts of friends who have unselfishly worked on my behalf; and two of them I have actually suspected of being the perpetrators of the crime. That I have had cause to suspect them may be the case; but after what Mr. Agar Halfi has done, and after what I have heard to-day, I can only hope that he and Mr. Brentwood will not bear any ill-feeling toward me for the position I took up."

The Hindoo's reply was quick and generous:

"On that point, Mr. Shepperton, you may take it that neither Mr. Brentwood nor I have any ill-feeling toward you; we both understand the position. You and Miss Alletson had cause to suspect us, and indeed at one time I myself very nearly suspected the Master of Storton, so strong did the evidence seem against him."

"I am indeed glad to know that," responded Shepperton, "because both Miss Hobson and I realise that but for you she would not be sitting here to-day. And now there is one thing I must tell you, Mr. Agar Halfi. Mr. Canning here is a private detective, whom I called in to investigate. Almost from the beginning, however, he has not agreed with my idea of things. But enough; I will let him speak for himself."

They all looked at the detective, who, rousing

himself from the sprawling attitude he had naturally slipped into, looked keenly at the Hindoo, and said :

" Mr. Agar Halfi will no doubt be interested to learn that I can confirm his remarks about his experience at the priory, as it happens that I was the stranger he met there."

Agar Halfi looked at him closely, then slowly shook his head. Canning smiled, then proceeded :

" Of course you would hardly recognise me, as I was disguised. Let me now thank you for saving my life ! You hardly gave me an opportunity to do so at the time."

The Hindoo looked surprised and confused, while the rest of the company, who knew the details of the detective's experience, enjoyed the situation.

At length he remarked :

" Then you do not think that it was trickery ? "

" I did not at the time," replied the detective, " but I wanted to test it as far as I possibly could, though in doing so I ran a very grave risk, as I realised afterward, when you had gone. That will explain the attitude I took up in the ruins. Almost from the first I have felt that the case was not a commonplace one, and that it was outside the sphere of the ordinary detective. In any case, I have not seen any real reason to suspect the Master of Storton as being the criminal. Indeed the only bit of evidence worth consideration has been that of Miss Alletson."

All eyes instinctively turned to Constance, who all through the meeting had not spoken a word.

" May I ask, Miss Alletson, what your opinion is

now, regarding what you experienced?" asked Canning.

Constance, whose cheek was resting on her hand, raised her head as she replied:

"Simply that I hold the same view, except that I now know Mr. Brentwood is innocent, and was innocent of the obsession under which he is suffering. I have no doubt about what I suffered at that experiment," she concluded, with a slight smile.

"What about the future, Mr. Agar Halfi?" asked the Vicar.

"I can only wait and watch developments, until Mr. Brentwood is sufficiently recovered to enable him to deal with things. So far, he is progressing as satisfactorily as can be expected—I should say that he will be convalescent in twelve to fourteen days."

The meeting now practically broke up, though for some time afterwards they sat talking over various matters. At last, however, Agar Halfi said that he must get back to the Manor to see how Mr. Brentwood was; he already felt he had left him too long.

He had come over in the car, and as he stepped into it, he picked up an envelope lying on the seat, addressed to himself in an unknown handwriting. He glanced at it casually, then put it in his pocket. Not until he had seen the Master of Storton, and satisfied himself that all was right, did he think of the strange note. Taking it out of his pocket, he opened the envelope, and discovered a half sheet of note-paper. Upon it, in a woman's handwriting, were the words:

"Watch, and do not sleep, for the end is near."

CHAPTER XXIV

FAIL NOT, GREAT WIZARD!

AGAR HALFI stood with grave eyes, watching the motionless form of the Master of Storton. The fever caused by the wound in his shoulder had abated, but the condition of the patient this morning gave the Hindoo cause for deep concern.

The previous evening Brentwood had been tossing restlessly on his bed, now he was in a deep swoon. In the ordinary course of things, after the fever had died down, Agar Halfi knew that his patient should have regained consciousness.

This strange turn in the sickness perplexed him, and the fear rose in his mind that the Master of Storton was passing through yet another phase of this weird mystery. The scar on his throat still retained the bright colour it had assumed on the evening when he was injured, and this in itself was sufficient to cause Agar Halfi to judge that they were not yet clear of this evil influence.

When he used his power to attack that unnatural manifestation in the study, he not only felt that he had annihilated it entirely, but that he had also killed his beloved friend. But now he was forced to conclude that he had done neither.

All day long he scarcely left the bedside, watching ever anxiously for signs of returning consciousness; but none came, and toward evening the patient's

condition developed into trance. The Hindoo examined him closely as he noticed the change, and a look of intelligent surprise passed over his countenance. There was not much doubt that this trance was similar to the one which Brentwood had suffered in Afghanistan.

For a space, he stood thinking, then he rang for Mrs. Breton. When she appeared, Agar Halfi held up a warning hand, and her eyes instinctively sought the unconscious form of her master. She started slightly, and turned to Agar Halfi with questioning eyes.

"Complications have set in, Mrs. Breton, and the master must not be left alone at present. Will you please wire to Westsea at once for two trained nurses, and tell Williams to get the car ready? I want him to take a letter."

"Surely I can nurse him, in fact I would much prefer to do so."

"Quite so," replied the Hindoo, "but you have more than you can do at present, Mrs. Breton, and you cannot stay with him day and night."

The reasonableness of this was evident, and she inclined her head reluctantly. Then she asked in a concerned voice:

"Is there any danger?"

Agar Halfi shook his head. "I don't know at present: all I can say is that Mr. Brentwood has passed into a strange trance."

She breathed quickly, and looked at the Hindoo critically. It was a serious matter to her, for the Master of Storton was a good employer, well liked by all who were in his service. Still, she had con-

fidence in this strange man, and beyond attending to the master in a medical capacity, he had not interfered with her in any way.

"You were up all last night and have hardly left the bedside during the day; when are you going to rest?"

"Send for the nurses, Mrs. Breton, and then I will take a respite."

When she had left the room, Agar Halfi went up into the study, and taking pen and paper wrote the following letter:

"STORTON MANOR, STORTON.

"MADAME,—The Master of Storton, after being ill from an accident, has fallen into a strange trance, which I believe is similar to the one which Miss Hobson suffered, when in your hospitable hands.

"If it is the same, I must take immediate action, for there is grave danger; but before doing so, I should like to have confirmatory evidence to that effect.

"I cannot leave Mr. Brentwood at present; would you therefore consent to come over in the car, and give me your opinion as to whether the two cases are identical?

"I humbly apologise for the liberty I take in asking this, but the life of the Master of Storton is in the balance.—Yours respectfully, AGAR HALFI."

Carefully sealing it in an envelope, he addressed it to Madame Héloïse Limonaire, The Châlet, Storton. That done, he went in search of Williams, and was satisfied to find him ready, waiting with the car.

"I want you to take this letter to the Châlet as quickly as you can. Wait for an answer, and probably you will bring back a passenger."

Williams—a solid west-country youth of about twenty—said "Right!" and started the engine. He had been brought up as under-chauffeur, and knew his business.

"You should be back in half an hour."

Williams said "Right!" once more, and drove off.

Agar Halfi returned at once to the sick-room, and telling Mrs. Breton that he would stay with Mr. Brentwood until the nurses came, composed himself to await the return of Williams. As he sat in the silence, his eyes, heavy with sleep, began to close, and almost against his will he dozed. When he awoke, it was with an acute feeling that something out of the ordinary was going to happen. It must be the after-effects of a dream, he thought; people usually dream when they doze; yet he could not remember having dreamed anything. However, the matter passed from his mind, for just then Mrs. Breton entered the room to inform him that Madame Limonaire was in the library.

Rising, he went downstairs to meet her. Héloïse Limonaire was standing by the fireplace, looking out of the window. She turned as he entered the room, and they looked at each other. Then there happened one of those mysterious, inexplicable episodes which have baffled all man's science and all man's reason, ever since the beginning of time.

So far as they knew, neither of these two people had ever seen the other, and yet no sooner did their eyes meet, than it seemed as if some long-forgotten

memory were awakened. The woman started visibly, and suppressed a low cry of wonder. The man came to a sudden halt, and drew in a deep breath.

Perhaps for half a minute they stood, then Héloïse Limonaire involuntarily put her hand to her throat, as if to protect it, while Agar Halfi turned colour under his dark skin, and his great frame trembled, as though with nervous shock. Neither spoke nor moved, and it seemed as if they were silently trying to understand what the mysterious unknown something was, that each held for the other.

At length the Abbess' hand slowly fell again to her side, and her lips moved.

"You?" she said absently.

"Yes, it is I!" the man answered mechanically, as though without control over what he said, while his dark eyes never left her deep spiritual face, which commanded him with an unknown power. With an effort, she turned her gaze to the window, and the Hindoo found himself looking at her beautiful face in profile. Then, the magic of her eyes no longer holding him, he recovered his normal self-possession.

With a low bow he said:

"Madame Limonaire, I am Agar Halfi, the body servant of the Master of Storton."

"Yes, monsieur; you wish to see me respecting Mr. Brentwood, I understand."

The sound of her voice affected him in a strange manner. It was as if some long-dormant chord deep down in his inner self had been delicately struck, and vibrating in sympathetic response to the touch, had

called back out of the dust of the past a memory of mingled ecstasy and suffering.

So sweet, so gentle her tone, yet so dignified and expressive of strength her manner, that Agar Halfi for a moment wondered whether or not he was talking to a mortal woman.

"True, madame; my beloved master is in danger, and believe me, I deeply thank you for troubling to come."

When he first wrote the letter, he meant to question the lady concerning Elsie Hobson's trance, but now he altered his mind.

"I think the best thing would be for you to come and see Mr. Brentwood, and then tell me what you think."

Just a second she hesitated, and then, with a graceful inclination of her head, she replied:

"Yes, monsieur, I will see him."

Agar Halfi conducted her to Mr. Brentwood's room, and after introducing her to Mrs. Breton, he escorted her to the side of the unconscious man's couch. The Abbess looked at him meditatively, while the Hindoo watched her curiously. Then without a word she silently pointed to the jagged scar on the Master of Storton's throat. Agar Halfi's curiosity increased, but he did not show it by look or gesture; and it was not until Mrs. Breton, in reply to a knock at the door, asked to be excused, saying the nurses had arrived, that he replied:

"Do you know what it is?"

By way of answer, Héloïse Limonaire looked fully at him and made a secret sign. The Hindoo uttered an exclamation of surprise and made a

corresponding one. It had not occurred to him that a woman would be an initiate of the mystic arts.

She smiled a rare smile in acknowledgment and again their eyes met. Once more that mysterious spell enveloped them, but this time she seemed not to be looking at him, but beyond.

Who was this woman, whose remarkable personality held him? He watched her, fascinated, then he felt he was in the grasp of an influence, the strength of which made him feel as weak as water; so pure, so soft, so absorbing, yet a master power.

A strange trembling passed through his frame, and subconsciously he became aware that words were coming from his mouth, as though another intelligence were using his physical organs.

"What is the meaning of this riddle, Sorceress?"

As if expecting the question, she answered slowly:

"Here lies the King, Wizard of the Mountains, under the evil spell which I in my wickedness wrought in the distant past!"

A slight perspiration broke out over his body as she spoke. Dimly it came to his understanding that she was reading the riddle of his existence, and so stupefied was he with wonder that he could not have answered just then, had he wanted to.

Her marvellous eyes searched his countenance as she continued:

"When are you going to accomplish your task, Wizard? Not till then will the King recover!"

Again the words seemed forced from his mouth:

"At the appointed time, Sorceress, will I slay."

She clasped her white hands on her breast, and went on in her gentle, dreamy way:

"The hour draws near; at the New Moon must you carry out the decree. Fail, and once more will you traverse that endless plane of woe to which you are at present bound, and each time the period increases in length."

Agar Halfi humbly bowed his head and there was awe in his voice as he replied:

"Sorceress, you are higher than I; tell me, how many times have I failed?"

"Twice have you failed at the critical juncture, thrice have you traversed the earth plane."

"And you?" he asked.

"I have conquered. I am but held here until you have slain the evil which I created. Our destinies are inseparably bound together, Wizard; long have I waited for you to win the way."

"And if I fail not this time?"

"Then you will release us both from bondage, and together shall we pass unto the higher spheres."

As she spoke, she suddenly stretched forth her hands and there was a great appeal in her eyes.

Something like a moan came from his lips as he answered:

"I will not fail, Sorceress—yet—yet, I feel there is only one way."

Her expression was one of mingled tenderness and anguish, as she answered softly:

"Only one way, Wizard, and that is death!"

"Death!" he repeated mechanically, and then with his hands to his brow he staggered back, overwhelmed, cognisant that his end was near. The veil had been torn, and in the great spiritual eyes of the woman before him he saw his destiny.

" Courage," she whispered. " In death shall you find life and love."

As though ashamed at the weakness he had shown, Agar Halfi drew himself up, and folding his arms across his chest said :

" Enough ! I shall not fail. I could not now that I fully know all."

" And yet remember, that twice before did you fail when I appealed."

" Ah, Sorceress, but you know that I had not heard your appeal. Tell me, why have I not known at those other times ? "

" Tell me, Wizard, how it is that you know now ? " she replied.

But he shook his head.

She smiled as she continued :

" By the powers that you have fought with and conquered, by the self-sacrifices you have had to make to become a master in the mysterious arts. This is the reward, Wizard, that you are allowed to become self-conscious of your task ; but for that, I could not have recognised you, nor you me."

He looked at her in wonderment ; what she said was truth, and he marvelled at it all. Then he slowly turned his head toward the unconscious man.

" And the King ? "

" The King will live ; his destiny at present is here," she answered quietly. " Yet, leave you a note signed and sealed for him when he awakes, so that he may come to me to know of this. And now I must depart."

Mechanically Agar Halfi opened the door, and she preceded him down the stairs. As they

reached the great main entrance, he turned to her saying :

" And you, when shall we meet again ? "

" Soon," she sighed, " but not on the earth plane."

" Wherever I am I shall seek you," he whispered.

" And wherever I am I shall wait for you," she answered.

" And now for a brief period, good-bye. Forty-eight hours brings the New Moon ! "

Saying which, she went down the grey stone steps to the motor car which Williams had in readiness.

" Take Madame Limonaire back to the Châlet, Williams," he called in a clear voice.

The whirr of the engine fell on his ears, the car started slowly, and he heard it roll off into the night. Until the sound of the brougham had died away he stood, and then a great passionate convulsion gripped the man, and stretching out his arms he uttered an inarticulate, deeply smothered cry. It was the deathless call of one soul to another, which just for a moment had seen behind the veil, and in a flash had realised that now, and always, through eternity, the unquenchable fire of love is the mysterious power that rules the universe, and through it guides the destiny of every human soul.

CHAPTER XXV

"I AM BUT AS THE DUST"

BRENTWOOD was almost certain he heard a familiar voice saying to him, "Awake! Awake!" He listened intently, and slowly it occurred to him that he must have been dreaming.

Opening his eyes, he gazed round, and received a slight shock of surprise. The electric light was on, and seated by a bright fire, was a nurse reading. He looked at her wonderingly; then his eyes turned to the window, and he saw that the dawn was breaking, cold and grey.

Had he been ill? He could not tell, though it appeared very much like it from the look of the room, and the presence of the nurse. He made as if to move, when a sharp pain ran through his left shoulder. It was as if the physical sensation caused the natural functions of his body and mind to start working, for in a flash his memory returned, and he remembered all; the experiment, the leap of the dog, the pain caused by the crushing of his shoulder. After that, nothing, until the strange call of that voice he knew, and he found himself awake.

Ah, he must have been delirious with the fever, which would almost be sure to have set in. He thought it over for a time, and at last the details of things pieced themselves together, and he realised everything.

"Nurse!"

The book the Sister was reading almost fell from her hands at the sound. Starting up quickly, she went to the bedside, a look of surprised curiosity on her face.

"Can I have some water?"

She looked doubtful at first, then said:

"Yes, I think you may have a little."

He drank it with a relish, then inquired:

"How long have I been unconscious?"

"Several days, sir," she replied.

"Several days?"—He paused, then added: "Where is Mr. Agar Halfi?"

"He has not been in since ten o'clock last night. I expect he will be here as usual, about eight this morning."

Mr. Brentwood nodded.

"Could you drink some beef tea?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," he answered uncertainly.

"Well, I will make some, anyway."

He watched her idly while she prepared it. He was indifferent whether he had it or not; but after the first spoonful he felt hungry, and drank it eagerly. The warmth it gave soothed him, and in less than five minutes he had fallen into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, it was past ten o'clock, and a fresh nurse was in the room. It was not long before her attentive eyes saw that he was not asleep, and she came over to him immediately.

"Well, sir, do you feel better?"

He smiled oddly as he replied:

"That I can hardly say. I certainly don't feel ill!" He paused, then added: "Where is Mr. Agar Halfi?"

She looked a trifle perplexed as she answered:

"He has not yet been in this morning. He usually comes about eight o'clock."

"What time is it now?"

"A quarter past ten."

"What is the matter, nurse?"

She had stood still suddenly, and was looking at him with wonder in her eyes.

"The scar, sir; it has gone!"

Brentwood instinctively put his hand to his throat, then smiled slowly.

"Are you quite sure?" he queried.

"Quite—there is not a trace of it visible. Let me fetch a glass, then you can see for yourself."

The Master of Storton examined his neck very carefully, then silently put the hand-mirror on the counterpane. What the nurse had said was true; not a vestige of the scar remained.

"Nurse, I should like to see Mrs. Breton."

He had hardly spoken, when there was a hurried knock at the door, and the housekeeper entered, with a perturbed look on her face.

"Nurse," she exclaimed quickly, "is Mr. Brentwood—" She stopped abruptly, as her eyes met those of her master.

"Good morning," he said tranquilly; then seeing the troubled look on her face, he added, "What is the matter, Mrs. Breton?"

"Oh, sir, I'm so glad you are better. But I cannot understand this—" here she held up her

hand, which contained a letter. "Williams gave it to me just now, and said that Mr. Agar Halfi handed it to him last night, with instructions to deliver it to me after ten o'clock this morning." She paused, breathing quickly.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"I will read it, sir:

"DEAR MRS. BRETON,—I have instructed Williams to hand you this note after ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Enclosed you will find a letter addressed to Mr. Brentwood, which please hand to him. I have no doubt that he will not only be conscious by then, but practically all right in health.

"AGAR HALFI."

Brentwood silently held out his hand for the packet. Tearing it open, he read as follows:

"MY BELOVED FRIEND,—Should you receive this document before you see me, you will understand that I have passed away from the physical plane of existence! But let not that disturb you; it is part of my destiny, as you will learn later on—my time has come.

Know that when you received the wound in your shoulder, the scar on your throat turned blood-red, and when the fever which set in had abated, instead of recovering consciousness you passed into a swoon similar to that which you suffered in Afghanistan. In order to make quite sure that your trance tallied with Miss Hobson's, I immediately sent for Madame Limonaire, with the object of getting her to confirm the symptoms. But little did I realise what would

be the result of my request. The question of the trance became a secondary matter, when, on Madame's appearance, I at once learned that she held the key to the evil which has been overshadowing us for so long. I also learned that I was partly the cause, that through me alone could it be allayed; and further, that there was only one way to accomplish it. That course I have taken. When you read this, look to the scar on your throat; if it has entirely disappeared, you will know that I have succeeded, and you will be free from the evil which has obsessed you ever since it attacked you in Afghanistan, five years ago.

I request you to send without delay for the Abbess—it is her command—who will explain all.

Seek you my body in my private room at the Lodge, where I now go to prepare myself to overcome the dread evil of the Legend of the Mountains. In three hours, at the New Moon, I trust that in death I shall be triumphant.

Until in the future we meet again, fare you well, my best beloved friend. AGAR HALFI."

As he mastered its contents, Brentwood's lips shut in a hard line, and his features assumed a stony expression. The two women looked at him with mingled wonder and awe; they instinctively knew that something had happened, and for a time there was an impressive silence. He broke it at length, by saying in a cold, level voice:

"Mrs. Breton, I will dress at once. Please send Williams to me."

So stern was his tone, that the housekeeper—

who, under ordinary circumstances, would have remonstrated with him—without a word went to do his bidding, and the nurse followed her out.

When they had gone, something like a sob issued from his throat, and a look of intense grief came over his face. In his weakened state, the shock of being deprived of the one human being for whom he had ever felt any real affection acted with double force; it almost prostrated him. He lay half-helpless, in a dull sort of dream, until Williams announced his presence by knocking at the door. Rousing himself, Brentwood told the under-chauffeur to come in.

It took a long while, but with Williams' aid he at length got dressed, and finally was seated in a big divan chair, by the fire.

Here, with difficulty, he wrote a short note to Héloïse Limonaire, and after sending for Mrs. Breton, told Williams to go straight to the Châlet in the car, and bring the Abbess back with him.

When he had gone, the Master of Storton turned to his housekeeper, and said:

"Mrs. Breton, I must, I think, prepare you for some bad news. I'm afraid something has happened to Mr. Agar Halfi, but I cannot say for certain, until I have seen Madame Limonaire, whom I have sent Williams to fetch. When she arrives, please ask her to come to my room without delay."

"Really, sir, I do hope the trouble is not so very serious. But must you be out of bed? I feel it is risky for you to be up."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. Breton. Beyond being a little weak, and just a trifle stiff, I am all

right. I would not have got up, had I not felt that something very grave had happened.

Now I am ready to come under the nurse's care again. I expect my shoulder will want dressing and my arm will have to be put in a sling for the present."

By the time the Abbess had arrived, the nurse had satisfactorily attended to the Master of Storton's shoulder, and his arm was comfortably suspended by his side.

He rose to meet Madame Limonaire with mingled feelings, but one glance told him that she was not an ordinary woman. He felt her influence immediately she crossed the threshold of the room, and in spite of his own powers, backed by a masterful mind, he was sensible of a presence greater than his own.

Both remained silent for some time after Mrs. Breton had left the room, the Abbess standing with one foot on the curb, and one hand on the mantelpiece, looking sadly into the fire, while Brentwood gazed at her with growing respect. Instinctively he became aware that she possessed powers similar to his own, but in a higher and grander degree.

At last he said in a low voice :

" Did you understand, madame, the crude note I sent to you ? "

" Perfectly," she answered, without looking up.

" Then will you please read what my friend, Agar Halfi, has written ? "

Slowly extending her hand, she took the letter which he held forth, and silently perused it. He watched her closely while she read, but only a slight

heave of her breast disturbed her composure, though her mouth grew unspeakably tender.

When she had finished, he waited patiently, expecting some comment; but she remained silent, mechanically tapping the fingers of her left hand with the letter, which she had folded up.

It was he who spoke first:

"Madame Limonaire, during the past fifteen years of my life I have gone through some strange experiences, and seen things which average intelligent people would classify as fairy tales, if they were seriously put forth; yet if the contents of that letter are true, I fear that the mysterious evil which came into my life some five years ago is beyond the scope of my knowledge. When I read that letter, I was, as you may well understand, surprised, and I wondered if it were possible that any living being, let alone a woman, could unravel this tangled skein."

"Why so, Monsieur? why should a woman be less capable of solving it than anyone else?"

The subtle attraction in her sweet, gentle tones stirred him a little. He had spoken to her as an intellectual equal; but the sound of her voice—without dispelling the first idea—forcefully reminded him that there was a distinct and sharp line between the sexes, of which he had not hitherto been conscious.

"It is seldom women attain the high development that men reach," he answered steadily.

"Why do you think that?"

He hesitated a moment before he replied:

"Probably because they have not had, and do not now have, the same opportunities."

" Monsieur Brentwood, what do you know about women ? "

She turned her beautiful face toward him, and their eyes met. Instinctively the Master of Storton felt all his powers gathering to combat this extraordinary personality, unconsciously the forces within him challenged her power, but the pure clear look of her remarkable eyes met his glance with an easy calm.

For nearly a minute their minds clashed, during which period the man suffered more than he had ever done in the whole of his life. The light of her eyes grew in intensity, and he became terribly aware that he was seeing the faults of his existence. What a distorted, feeble thing after all ! He, who had imagined he had evolved so high—nothing but a puny, weak mortal. He was being forced to know it, to admit it ! A scorching shame passed over him, he closed his eyes to shut out the overwhelming power of her gaze, and with the fall of his pride, he gave a short cry. Sinking back in his choir, he bowed his head, covering his eyes with his right hand.

During the long silence which ensued, the Master of Storton, crushed as he was, learned that he was but partially developed, a sort of lop-sided ego, which, having conquered some things, had carelessly, if not wilfully, neglected others equally important.

" I am but as the dust ! " he exclaimed bitterly.

" Monsieur ! "

The deep ring of unselfish sympathy in her voice lifted him out of the depths into which he had sunk, and a new hope rose in him. Slowly looking up, he beheld her standing with outstretched arms,

tears of pain in her eyes, and an expression of grief on her spiritual face.

"Think not that I came to punish you; I am but the instrument through which the lesson you have had to learn has been conveyed. You have suffered greatly, so also have I in witnessing your agony. But as you must know, the more a soul develops, the more refined it becomes, the greater is its suffering—this is the law.

"But that you have striven and struggled toward good, this lesson could not have been learned by you in this particular way. It is part of your reward; you have but to profit by it. For some years, your destiny is here. Seek it in self-sacrifice; go out into the world of struggling humanity, and, as far as you are able, emulate the Master Magician—continue his work."

She paused, and he looked at her wonderingly, but without fear, for he understood. In the same way that he loved his friend Agar Halfi, so he loved this strange woman. He knew now that they were both on the same plane of development, where jealousy and envy have long been conquered and forgotten.

"Madame, it is good that one's pride should be humbled. Only too well do I realise the mistake I have made. By avoiding certain things in the world, I have remained ignorant of them, thinking that they did not matter."

"Seek, and ye shall find," she replied simply. "And now, Monsieur, if you are ready, let us go and discover him who has fulfilled his part in this one of many destinies in the great eternal life."

Slowly rising, he went up into his study and took a key from his desk. Returning, with the aid of the Abbess he donned his ulster, and together they went by the secret stair out of the house, to the lodge. Here Brentwood, with some trepidation, effected an entrance to the Hindoo's private room with the key he had brought, and standing on one side, allowed the Abbess to precede him.

As they crossed the threshold, that which met their eyes caused the man to stifle a low cry, but the woman gave no sign.

Lying full length on the carpet, dressed in his ritual robes, lay the body of Agar Halfi, a look of serene calm on his fine countenance. In his right hand was a white wand; in his left, and held to his breast, the large gold cross without which he had never conducted any experiment. A copper brazier stood at his head, another at his feet.

Just for a moment they stood looking with deep reverence at the solemn scene, then the Master of Storton stepped quickly to the side of the silent figure, and bending down on one knee, carefully examined it.

"Dead! Quite dead!" he whispered brokenly. Looking up, he met the quiet eyes of Héloïse Limonaire, who was standing on the other side of the body, her hands clasped on her breast.

As she gazed at him, the Master of Storton suddenly felt that he was in the grip of some mysterious power. Strange scenes passed before his vision, cries in an unknown tongue rang in his ears. They passed, and he heard the voice of the Abbess speaking:

"King of a once great race, here lies the body of

the Wizard of the Mountains, who, having fulfilled his destiny here, has departed from the earth plane. No more exists the evil which I, the Sorceress, in my wickedness brought forth long ago, to cause his downfall. By his sacrifice has he destroyed it, and, great King, we are free, the goal is won. Soon shall I follow, there to join him, and together shall we evolve onward and upward in the vast eternal scheme.

But you, who were once a monarch, know that your time has not yet come. As every physical body seeks its mate, so every soul seeks its counterpart, and every spirit its affinity. Seek you yours on the earth plane, you shall not labour in vain. Then shall a change of consciousness carry you onward."

Her voice died away, and with it the spell. Released from her magnetic gaze, the Master of Storton's eyes wandered to the dead man's face, and as he stared he almost thought he saw a quiet smile of triumph disturb the impassive features. He started, and rising to his feet was about to speak, when he saw that the Abbess was standing with bent head, and clasped hands, as though in prayer over the clay house that had once imprisoned the companion of her destiny.

For some time she stood thus, then with a deep sigh she turned, and said calmly:

"Come, Monsieur, I would depart—my task is accomplished."

CHAPTER XXVI

TILL THE STARS MEET

THEY buried the body of Agar Halfi quietly and without ceremony in the village churchyard, and when the Rev. Philip Alletson read the burial service it was a characteristic group that stood in silent reverence over the Hindoo mystic's earthly remains.

Elsie Hobson and Arthur Shepperton were there, in acknowledgment of all that that strange man had done for them; also Herbert Canning, who had come to pay his last respects to the man who had saved his life.

Close to the grave stood the Master of Storton, pale and set, a look of stern sorrow on his handsome face. Not far away, deeply veiled, was the Abbess, silent and still. By her side stood Constance, with trembling lips and wet eyes.

They all knew what had transpired—omitting certain details, and with Madame Limonaire's permission, Brentwood had frankly explained to the rest, the final act in this mysterious drama. At that meeting, whatever resentment the young solicitor may have had against the Master of Storton vanished. He was not ungenerous, and when—to the surprise of everyone except the Abbess—Brentwood had offered his hand, Shepperton had gripped it genuinely, and the Master of Storton turned a one-time enemy into a friend.

As for Constance, the words she had once spoken to Philip, *i.e.* that if he were innocent she would never be able to look him in the face again for very shame, came home to her forcefully now, and while she stood listening to her brother's voice by the graveside, she cast one or two nervous glances at the motionless figure of the man she loved. "When it was over, would he speak to her?" she thought. If he did, she felt she would have to apologise, and she was afraid—not of having to apologise, but of herself!

However, beyond the usual formalities, he did not address her, and when his carriage had departed, the reaction of the strain she had put upon herself made her tremble. It was then that a gentle pressure on her arm made her turn, to find herself looking into the calm, beautiful eyes of Héloïse Limonaire.

The trembling stopped almost immediately, and she was aware of a restful feeling, similar to that which she had experienced when she first met Agar Halfi.

"Peace, child," she whispered in her sweet voice, "do not distress yourself. There is sunshine with the rain, and that which you were told, by him whose body lies yonder, will soon come to pass!"

The next moment the Abbess had stepped into her carriage, and before Constance could reply it had rolled away, leaving the Vicar's sister to reproach herself for being selfish. Surely, if any person wanted sympathy just then, it was Madame Limonaire, and yet the great generous spirit of that remarkable woman had swept on one side her own

trouble, just to give comfort to a sister, whom she had realised was suffering quietly, when they stood side by side at the grave of Agar Halfi the Mystic.

About a week later, one beautiful sunny morning, Mr. Brentwood was sitting on an old rustic seat beneath a great oak, somewhere in one of the corners of his immense garden.

Since the death of his friend he had changed visibly. For one thing, the hard stern lines of his face, which had been so characteristic of the man and made people avoid him, had vanished; while the cold look of his deep brown eyes was no longer discernible. But his countenance bore traces of suffering, and a close inspection would have revealed a distinct touch of grey in his dark hair.

Not until Agar Halfi had passed over did the Master of Storton realise how much he was attached to him, and there was a lonely feeling in his heart when at times he unconsciously listened, expecting to hear the familiar voice, and then suddenly remembered the loss he had sustained.

But as there is no "cloud without a silver lining," so the grief of this reserved, proud man was slowly but surely being superseded by a new and mysterious power.

Ever since his memorable interview with the Abbess, the Master of Storton had realised that the loneliness he had sometimes experienced during his life was due to the fact that man is not meant to live in a solitary state, neither physically, mentally, nor spiritually. As he had become convinced of this, his eyes seemed to be opened, and one day he suddenly understood why he had been troubled

because a certain individual had suspected him of being the perpetrator of the Worlstoke Mystery.

Now it happened that this particular morning he sat deeply thinking about these things, when all at once he started up, and calling Hector, who lay lazily asleep at his feet, he put on his hat and went out.

Half an hour later he stood in the Vicarage drawing-room, whither Martha had shown him, when he had asked for Miss Alletson.

A minute later the door opened, and the Vicar entered.

"Really, Brentwood, I am glad to see you again," he said warmly. "Of course you will now stop to lunch?"

"Well, I hardly know," he replied uncertainly. "Did you understand why I called?"

The Vicar looked at him mystified, then replied:

"No, I'm afraid I don't quite grasp what you mean."

"Well, I will tell you, Alletson—I called to see your sister."

"Sister!" echoed the other.

"Yes, Alletson. Listen: I'm going to ask her to marry me," he said coolly.

For some time the two men looked at each other steadily. The Vicar was a little startled, yet in his heart he rejoiced. Like certain other people, he knew his sister's secret, and the fact that a happy ending to what even an hour ago seemed to be a tragedy, unnerved him for the moment. At length he took the Master of Storton's hand in his, and said, in a voice deep with emotion:

" Brentwood, it is a surprise to me ; I had no idea, but for my sister's sake I could not wish anything better. Constance went out about an hour ago, and I think she went for a walk in the woods. Go and find her, Brentwood, and God speed you."

It was Hector who first found her. She was standing at the end of the path that overlooks the village of Worlstoke, and was evidently on the way home.

She turned in surprise as the dog came bounding up to her, then her heart fluttered, for she found herself face to face with the man who held all the world for her.

Just for a few seconds they looked at each other, and she could not help noticing that his face was cold and hard.

Then she recovered her self-possession, and said almost normally :

" Mr. Brentwood, how can I satisfactorily apologise to you ? "

" For what ? " he asked, although he knew all the while what she meant.

She paused uncertainly—didn't he understand ?

" My—my suspicions of you."

He laughed oddly, and answered indifferently :

" I don't need any apology ! "

She grew proud in an instant. Why had she spoken ? The man seemed made of marble.

" If I have offended too deeply, I regret it ; I cannot do more."

" You can ! "

The colour went from her cheeks ; his tone did not assure her, and she could not understand his attitude.

"Mr. Brentwood, what do you mean?"

"Constance!"

The intense feeling in his voice caused her to draw in a deep breath. During the pause which followed, their eyes met, and as in her dream she saw the cold brown eyes grow warm, then unspeakably tender. Her lips quivered, her breast heaved, and as she realised what it all meant, she gave a smothered cry and dropped her gaze.

He took her hand, and she felt his grasp warm and strong. It thrilled her, and as in a dream she heard his voice:

"Constance, I came to find you, with the hope that I may never leave you again. Can I hope so much?"

As she understood his words the woman, who at the touch of his hand had felt helpless, realised her power.

She raised her eyes, with a light in them which made the blood rush to his heart.

"Hugo Brentwood, I loved you long ago," she said simply.

She looked into his eyes, this time quite without fear, for not a trace could she discern of the dread evil which, the last time their eyes met, had held her in a grip of horror. All she saw was her own fair face reflected in the dark pupils, and she was restfully conscious that the cry which had come from her soul that dreadful night at the Manor had at last been answered.

Their lips met—and Hector, who was standing a dumb witness to this plighting of their troth, slowly wagged his tail as if with approval.

CHAPTER XXVII

AT LAST! OH BELOVED!

ONE evening about a fortnight later, when that moon whose birth signalised the death of Agar Halfi was on the wane, in the early twilight hour, the last rays of the setting sun gradually crept round the west wall of the "Châlet," until they shone through the window of a room on the ground floor which was utilised as a chapel.

There they revealed the solitary figure of Héloïse Limonaire, kneeling at an altar, a large gold cross clasped to her breast, and an intense ethereal look in her marvellous eyes, from which seemed to blaze forth the light of her fettered soul.

In the small hours of the morning, just before the dawn, the silver rays of the dying moon reached the same window, and piercing the gloom, discovered the Abbess still there, but not kneeling.

She was lying at the foot of the altar, quietly still, her right hand tightly clasping the gold cross to her heart, her left arm hanging listlessly by her side. Closed were the spiritual eyes, and on her almost perfect features was a rare smile of happiness, as though she were peacefully sleeping. But there was not the gentlest movement of her bosom to denote that she breathed, and — and her body was colder than the cold moonbeams that kissed her cheek.

She had been released from her earthly prison; at last had she gone to join her affinity—and the smile on her countenance seemed to say, as though in triumphant answer to the words, "Seek, and ye shall find":

"I HAVE SOUGHT, AND I HAVE FOUND"

THE END

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